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FOLLOWING CEREBUS

Will Eisner Tribute Issue

Covering the Issue

Front Cover

Dave Sim: This issue's illustration is the first in a series of "Wouldn't It Have Been Great if Gerhard Had Worked on *Cerebus* From the Beginning?" covers. This one is based on panel one of page 234 of the *Cerebus* volume (or page 6 of issue 11, if you prefer). My attempt at the time to convey the rooftops of Paris at the time of the Revolution ended up looking—with the balcony running the width of the second building and the dormer windows occupying most of the face of the same building—like an upscale subdivision of Swiss ski chalets. Gerhard smooshed the buildings together, shortened the elevation of the roofs, lowered the perspective to establish the density of the streetscape, and made all the windows the appropriate sizes. Since all I had to do was to draw Cerebus and the Roach, I decided to solve one of the other problems from the original picture—the impression that the buildings were set on a wide boulevard—by drawing my own foreground building. The delineation of the bricks, the cartoon birds huddled in their nest, the "negative space" compositional use of snow, the books visible on the shelf through the window, the battered drain-pipe: each element was consciously or unconsciously influenced by the Will Eisner studio look of the late 1940s. That seemed to me sufficient reason to retain the picture when this, unexpectedly and sadly, became the Will Eisner Tribute Issue.

(continued on inside back cover)

Following Cerebus

Vol. 1 #4 May 2005

Following Cerebus **produced by**

Craig Miller
&
John Thorne

Cerebus **comic book by**

Dave Sim
&
Gerhard

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Why Will Eisner?

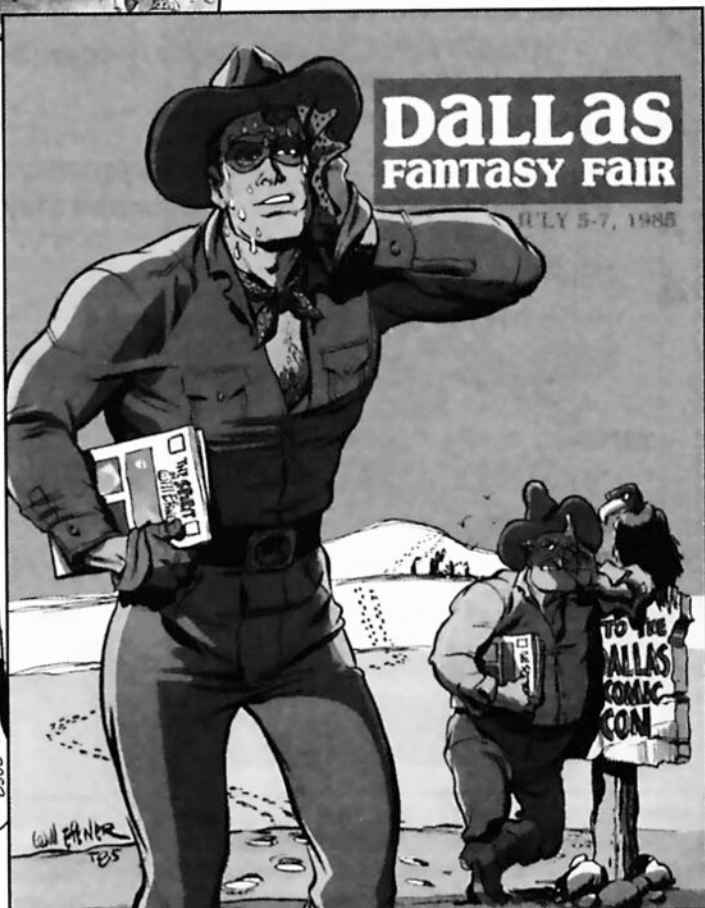
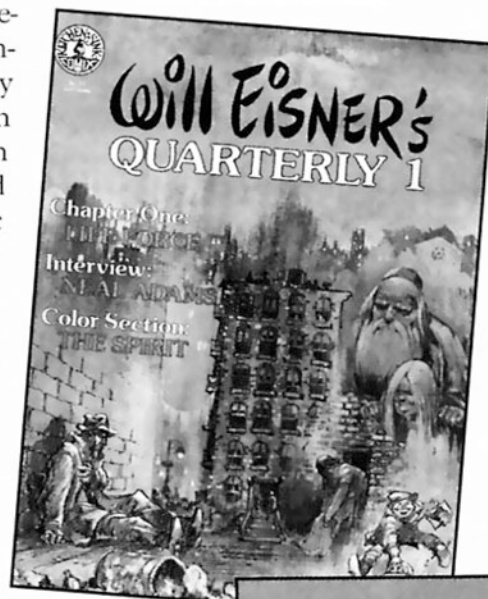
After three issues of *Following Cerebus* dominated by themes and story ideas, we decided that it was time for an Art Issue, so in late 2004 we pencilled that in as the cover feature for *FC* 4. We intended to look at the primary artistic comic book influences of Dave Sim and *Cerebus*, especially Barry Windsor-Smith, Neal Adams, and Will Eisner.

On January 3, about a week before we had to turn in content information for this issue to our distributor, Will Eisner died, and it seemed appropriate to turn the Art Issue into the Will Eisner Tribute Issue. Eisner was not only a major influence in the history of comics, but important in the development of Sim's art.

We thought we'd begin this issue be presenting a brief summary of just why Eisner was such an important figure in the development and maturation of comic books, but as we reread our volumes of comic history reference books, we realized that so much had been written about the man (every single one of those reference books contained significant coverage and praise for Eisner), there was nothing especially profound that we could come up with quickly for a succinct introduction, so we chose a different tact.

The bare bones of Eisner's history are generally well-known: born in 1917. Studied under George Bridgman. Began professional comics career at age 19. Founded a studio with Jerry Iger a year later. In 1940, he created the Spirit as a Sunday newspaper supplement. After a stint in the armed services, he returned to the Spirit until 1952, after which he concentrated on educational comics (though he never relinquished ownership of the Spirit, making him a pioneer of creator's rights years before it became a major controversy in the industry). He continued to innovate in his later years, producing what's generally considered the first modern graphic novel (and coining the term), *A Contract With God*, in his sixties. Artistically, he's credited with (among other things) bringing a cinematic, *film noir* influence into comics.

Those are basics. We could gush about individual books and stories (and we do, actually, beginning on page 30), but to get a flavor of Eisner's monumental impact on comics, let's survey what some others have said about him:

Frank Miller: I've studied Eisner's work in particular....[and] much more intensely [than anyone else's] over a much longer period of time because he does it all. **His work succeeds on every level.** I find

his stories good to study simply as stories, often, and his storytelling to be crucial to an understanding of the form. The work he's doing now, which I believe is largely being ignored, is fascinating to me because it's breaking new ground—not always successfully, but it's breaking new ground with the form, which isn't really being done anywhere else that I've seen.
Dwight Decker: You mean his *A Contract With God?*
FM: Yes, and his laboratory pieces for *The Spirit* magazine.

...

DD: Do you do "homage" yourself?
FM: You mean the *Spirit* billboards? Yeah, I do that.
Frank Miller, *The Comics Journal Library, Volume Two: Frank Miller* (2003, Fantagraphics Books), p. 23 (interview conducted in 1981).

"[Eisner] plotted his tales with taste, conviction and solid, often brilliant, craftsmanship....Eisner's real genius lay in the fusion of illustrations and scripts....Never had so much happened to so many in so few pages. Stories were told with words *and* pictures....Eisner was the first to realize that the size of a panel equals, in filmic terms, the length of a shot in time. With this knowledge he created stories with definite pacing....Eisner transformed comic pages into film storyboards." **Jim Steranko**, *The Steranko History of Comics 2* (1972, Supergraphics), pp. 113, 116.

"Will Eisner's influence on the art and development of the comic book has been tremendous and lasting." Maurice Horn, *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (Second Edition, 1999, Chelsea House), p. 278.

"Of the many artists of consequence in those early years, one of the first—and by any measure one of the greatest (I think **he was *the* greatest**)—was Will Eisner....It was Eisner, more than anyone else, who developed the multipage booklet story form that became the grammar of the medium....[By 1941] *The Spirit* had become the standard by which other comic books would be measured. Eisner had become a virtuoso cartoonist of a kind who had never been seen before in comic books—or, for that matter, in newspaper strips. He used all the elements of the comic book page—dialogue, drawing, panel composition, color—with great daring, but never at the cost of narrative clarity." **Harvey Kurtzman**, *From Aargh! to Zap! Harvey Kurtzman's Visual History of the Comics* (1991, Prentice Hall Press), pp. 7-8.

"Will Eisner was an early master of the German expressionist approach in comic books—the Fritz Lang school....**Eisner's world seemed more real than the world of other comic book men** because it looked that much more like a movie....His stories carried the same weight as his line, involving the reader, setting the terms, making the most unlikely of plot twists credible....I collected Eisners and studied them fastidiously. And I wasn't the only one. Alone among comic book men, Eisner was a cartoonist other cartoonists swiped from." **Jules Feiffer**, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965, Bonanza Books), pp. 34-35, 37.

Top: classic splash page from 1949. Middle: Spirit *2 (1983). Bottom: Eisner's final story featured the Spirit for Michael Chabon's* The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist *(2005).*

Basil Gogos's cover (top) for The Spirit *(1974; Warren) was based on a classic Spirit splash (middle) from 1950 featuring Sand Saref (see our article on page 38). In 1984, Eisner contributed a pin-up (bottom) to* Superman *400.*

Comix: A History of Comic Books in America (1971, Bonanza Books), p. 14.

"[With the Spirit,] Eisner developed his art and writing beyond the limits imposed by the regular publishers, evolving a new maturity and sophistication suited to his new audience. In its 12-year run, the weekly *Spirit Section* scaled the summit of American comic-book art." Denis Gifford, *The International Book of Comics* (1984, Crescent Books), p. 156.

"[In 1966] it seemed like everyone in fandom was raving about Eisner's amazing story-telling ability." Bill Schelly, *Sense of Wonder: A Life in Comic Fandom* (2001, TwoMorrows), p. 82.

"Probably no other cartoonist has ever made such fluent use of his medium....Eisner is, for one thing, a master of the "silent panel" (a panel without dialogue or captions), placing each such panel at the point where its dramatic effect is greatest." Michael Barrier, *A Smithsonian Book of Comic-Book Comics* (1981, Smithsonian Institution Press/ Harry N. Abrams), p. 270.

"He was perhaps the first artist to perceive the analogy between the film frame and the comic book panel, and applied the principle of cutting between camera angles to the rapidly shifting viewpoints of his own panels....He also studied such

"Eisner relished the opportunity to create a more adult hero for a newspaper audience...[and] the Spirit reached [that]...audience ....Eventually, twenty Sunday newspapers distributed the Spirit comic section to an audience of five million—nearly five times as many readers as the most popular comic books." Mike Benton, *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age: The Illustrated History* (1992, Taylor Publishing), pp. 128-129.

"**Will Eisner occupies a unique place among comic book men as an innovator of unparalleled ingenuity.** Equally skilled as a writer and an artist, he brought a dramatic flair to everything he touched, and left an indelible mark on every series he created....The comparatively few number of pages on which he worked is completely overshadowed by the effect they had on the rest of the industry." **Les Daniels**,

Spirit comics through the decades: [L-R] Spirit *1 (1966) & 2 (1967; Harvey);* Spirit *1 & 2 (1973; Kitchen Sink Press)*

Pencils to finished art: Eisner's preliminary drawing—as seen in The Will Eisner Sketchbook *(2003; Dark Horse)—and the final art for the cover of* The Comics Journal *89 (1984; Fantagraphics).*

masters of the short story as Ambrose Bierce, De Maupassant and O'Henry, and understood the value of a well-structured plot." P.R. Garriock, *Masters of Comic Book Art* (1978, Aurum Press Ltd.), p. 7.

"Eisner has tremendous ability in staging and portraying *any* type of scene....I passionately love comics...[and] Eisner is one of the big loves of my life. I've always enjoyed his work immensely. **He is one of the great masters of comic art.** I react *emotionally* to his art, not *critically*....He combines a high degree of professional, technical skill with a humanitarian outlook....He brings to his art much strength and vigor and feeling, and he gives us much joy." **Al Williamson**'s introduction to *Hawks of the Seas* (1986, Kitchen Sink Press), pp. vi-vii.

"Will Eisner is arguably the *first* comic book rebel....[He] successfully negotiated control and right to his own creation....*The Spirit* immediately established Eisner as one of the medium's true innovators, crafting a new summit in comic book art." Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette, *Comic Book Rebels* (1993, Donald I. Fine), p. 269.

"Will Eisner's *Spirit* has a longevity almost unequalled in comics....Strengths of *The Spirit* are that the supporting cast and parameters are so well drawn that it's possible to tell any type of tale....By [age] 26 (stories from early 1948) Eisner had hit peak form as both writer and artist....[and] **the inventive storytelling still inspires today**....Above all, the amount packed into seven pages is a masterful lesson in economy." **Frank Plowright**, *The Slings & Arrows Comic Guide* (1997, Aurum Press Ltd.), p. 528.

Why feature Will Eisner in *Following Cerebus* 4? Because it's the least we can do for the man who gave to us so much.

—CM/JT

Snarf *3 (1972; KSP);* Spirit Dailies *1 (1977);* Spirit *1 (1983; KSP);* Spirit: The Origin Years *1 (1992; KSP)*

My Dinner with Will & Other Stories

Pictured above: Will Eisner, Dave Sim, and Ed Furness at the 2004 Toronto Comicon.

by Dave Sim

(continued from last issue)

II

Once we were underway—the trip from the airport to downtown Toronto takes about thirty minutes—I noticed a peculiar effect that I had not experienced for some time and certainly not in recent memory: being dazzled by someone simply by being in their company. This effect would take hold any number of times over the course of the weekend. I would ask a question, and Will would be answering it, but I couldn't focus on what he was saying, because I was just sitting there thinking, "Wow. THE Will Eisner." This in turn made me aware that this wasn't unusual for him, and that he compensated for that effect by answering every question thoroughly and at length since (I assume) his most common experience was to arrive at the end of a reply to dead air and a distracted gaze of someone who was only capable under the circumstances of thinking, "Wow. THE Will Eisner."

I took out a notepad that I had brought with me and decided that I would write down everything that he said as a means both of focusing my attentions and of maintaining a record of what was discussed. I took the opportunity to tell him—as I never had before—of how important his studio style of the late 1940s had been to me. The longer I had worked on *Cerebus*, the more I had used that look as a template. As I told him, I modified the look a lot, of course. I used far more pen than brush, I wasn't creating for a general interest audience, and I wasn't limited to a beginning, middle, and end in eight pages. But as can be seen from this issue's cover—the foreground building is mine and archetypal Eisner—much of my visual problem-solving was purely Eisnerian. He thanked me for the compliment offhandedly (which is really the only way to thank someone for getting use out of material you produced over fifty years before), and I forged ahead knowing that he would prefer just about any other avenue of inquiry.

"Particularly the lettering. What was your letterer's name?"

"Abe Kanegson," he said, without a moment's hesitation and a little more enthusiasm. He was tired of discussing the Will Eisner of the late 40s but was always interested in communicating a memory of someone he had known, particularly the ones who didn't get asked about very much. As I wrote the name down, I noticed that my pen was skipping badly. I literally had to will the ink onto the page. This was one bit of information I couldn't let slide. "Yes, he was a wonderful letterer. He was a tall fellow, with frizzy red hair. He used to bring a guitar to work and play it and sing songs on his breaks. He had a very strong social conscience, very much on the side of the downtrodden and very much on the side of labour." Discrete euphemisms for either a socialist or a communist in the New York of the late 1940s. I would find this to be a fascinating side-note in any discussion with Will: the extent to which his acquaintanceships spanned the entire history of 20th century politics and the polite terminology that glossed over any differences.

"You got along with him okay, though?" I asked, prompting him. I was addressing the subject tangentially, but Will Eisner throughout his career

"I was just sitting there thinking, 'Wow. THE Will Eisner.'"

had been a capitalist in an artistic field that would always be several steps to the left of him. He didn't have studio-mates and assistants, he had employees. For many people in the arts, as I was well aware, that put you on the wrong side of the Rubicon. Of course, as I say, I was only prompting him—I had known the answer before I asked it.

"Oh, we got along fine," his face lit up at a sudden memory. "In fact, he used to fix my writing. I would rough in the captions and the dialogue, and he'd bring a page back and point to a caption and explain that there was something wrong with the grammar, or that the phrasing was redundant, and ask me if I minded if he changed it. I'd say, 'No, that's fine. Go ahead.'" He leaned forward at that point—no small feat for an eighty-seven year old man in a moving car—as he usually did when the conversation had reached a juncture that interested him beyond the level of chit-chat. "In fact, after a while I just told him to fix them. He didn't have to bring it back for my approval."

Abe Kanegson's great lettering on display in John Law Detective

Abe Kanegson, in other words, had been elevated from simply being a letterer to being a trusted collaborator on the writing of *The Spirit*. Right there was a good reason that Will Eisner transcended any archetypal capitalist labeling. In the Tudor City studio, he would maintain the hierarchical structure where it was necessary—he didn't, as an example, socialize with his employees ("Who could enjoy having a few beers with their boss standing right there?")—and chuck it out the window if it was needlessly in the way of getting the job done effectively. I'm sure the point hadn't been lost on Abe Kanegson.

"Much of my visual problem-solving was purely Eisnerian."

"What happened to him after you finished *The Spirit?*"

"I don't know," he said, with perfect frankness. It was the down side of being a capitalist. He had paid Abe Kanegson to do a job, and when the job was over, their relationship was over. He had learned enough about lettering from seeing how Kanegson did it that he could do a more-than-passable imitation and would use the style all the way through his years of illustrating the *PS Magazine* he produced in cooperation with the Pentagon and through his own pioneering graphic novels. There is no way to trademark or copyright an artistic "look." All artists are magpies. Neither Will nor I ever paid Abe Kanegson a cent in royalties for what we used of his. Nor, I assume, would Kanegson have expected us to. He had—with his sharp, squared off boldface lettering to denote emphasis, squared-off boldface lettering that would tilt anywhere from slight to crazy angles as a means of conveying calibrated degrees of emotionalism—designed and then perfected an ideal calligraphic "voice" capable of imparting great subtlety to comic-book narrative.

Our discussion of Abe Kanegson led tangentially to a discussion of who had done what on what *Spirit* stories at the peak studio period of the late 1940s. "You should hear me and Jules Feiffer going at it in a room," he chuckled with genuine affection, invoking the tone: "'No, you designed the splash page for this one, then you wrote the ending—I came up with the idea for the story, and you did it up to this point, then I did the next page and this sequence here and...' And I'll be swearing up and down that HE wrote the ending on that one. We never agree."

I then pulled out the tabloid colour *The Spirit* section that he had begun as part of his lecture series at the (then) brand-new cartooning course at Sheridan College in Oakville Ontario in 1973 and which he had then completed and allowed the school to publish as a fundraiser. The publication had predated the widely-known Warren Publishing and Kitchen Sink *Spirit* reprints and had dazzled just about everyone in Southern Ontario, all of whom had a copy of it by the mid-1970s. It's interesting that longtime Toronto comics fan Ron Kasman—who makes his appearance at the end of this narrative—remarked to me that back in the days of the first Cosmicon when I was fifteen and most of the Toronto crowd were eighteen (an age when three years constitutes an enormous difference) "when the rest of us were all into Marvel Comics, and we were listening to anything Stan Lee told us—Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, that was the peak—and I remember even back then you liked Will Eisner's work,

and even though I was a few years older than you, to me Eisner was just a rumour." I had to laugh at that invocation of what today seems an improbable reality: that there had been a time when you could be a devoted comic-book fan and still only know Will Eisner as "a rumour." The direct market didn't exist yet, and the historical record was almost entirely anecdotal. All of us were aware of Will Eisner and *The Spirit* as two equally legendary beings spoken of in hushed whispers—a legendary status that had been based largely on the "Jewel of Death" story that had been reprinted in Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes* and the "Mrs. Paraffin" story that had appeared in volume two of Steranko's *History of Comics* along with four of Eisner's ground-breaking splash pages. The fact that I had seen those two stories—as well as another splash page reproduced in *Captain George's Whizzbang* and the cover of the Harvey Comics reprint—at the time, here in the northern hinterlands, gave me the cachet of a fifteen-year old Will Eisner expert. The one-shot revival was mind-boggling for that reason. Not only had the rumour of Eisner's existence been confirmed, but the incarnation had—improbably—taken place in Oakville, Ontario! Eisner had picked up pretty much where he had left off twenty-two years before, doing what was essentially a science fiction story with The Spirit as a largely marginal presence—the character appears in only a handful of panels.

He hadn't seen it (nor, I suspect, thought of it) in nearly thirty years. He alternated between thumbing through it and trying to remember the name of the teacher who had invited him up. It was a mark of the sharpness of Will's memory that he didn't give up as would have been commonplace for most eighty-seven-year-olds.

The Spirit Tabloid *(1973)*

"Hanson," he said, finally after a number of minutes. "His name was Hanson."

And then he remembered—with visible relief—a number of other personal details about Mr. Hanson, his wife, the set-up of his classroom. With Will Eisner, at this stage of his life, memory was a profoundly personal consideration. He was the only surviving custodian of too many memories to let anything go without a fight. It was something to

"All of us were aware of Will Eisner and *The Spirit* as two equally legendary beings spoken of in hushed whispers."

see him really wrestling with what I had hoped would just be a pleasant reminder of his first trip to Canada. The recovery of the name "Hanson" had been a shared ordeal for a number of miles. I managed to write it down and then a ghost impression of "White Plains"—where the Eisners had been living at the time—just as my pen died. I felt the hand of God telling me to relax and enjoy the rest of the trip.

I asked Will how things were going now, generally, which led to a great burst of enthusiasm for Denis Kitchen, one of (a couple? several?) people who were representing his interests. Denis had largely disappeared behind the scenes since the unsuccessful merging of Tundra and Kitchen Sink that had led to the ultimate demise of the company he had founded and run for more than a quarter of a century. It was Harvey Kurtzman who had persuaded Denis to forsake cartooning for publishing. "We have plenty of cartoonists," Kurtzman is reported to have told him. "What we need are more good publishers."

"Denis is doing a wonderful job for me, representing me creatively and on original art sales." I lapsed again into "Wow. THE Will Eisner" mode and missed a number of the specifics, but there was no question that he trusted Denis implicitly—as he did former Kitchen Sink editor, the late Dave Schreiner, who edited all of his graphic novels [see next issue's cover story: "Advise & Consent: Editing Graphic Novels"]. He was enough of a capitalist, enough of a good businessman (my preferred term) that—in the aftermath of the Kitchen Sink bankruptcy—he wouldn't have maintained those relationships out of some sense of misguided or wrong-headed loyalty. Denis and Dave had proved themselves to him over the years and had been retained as key players in his world for that reason. He didn't need many people to keep his own operation going, so he picked his handful of insiders carefully.

Then I asked him about his general experiences

Dave Sim: "Table 100—ask for it by name—at the Resto Portico restaurant adjoining the Cambridge Suites Hotel, 15 Richmond Street East in downtown Toronto. The Staff bussed the table and set it with the evening service when I told them about Will Eisner and what I wanted the photo for."

and successes in the world of mainstream publishing that had been so long in coming. It was gratifying for me on his behalf to see that he had been—and was being—courted and feted by any number of mainstream publishers eager to sign him up both for the recently completed *The Plot* and for the upcoming graphic novels he was eager to work on. Again, the details were lost—mostly because I don't have an encyclopedic awareness of the inter-relationships of the various New York publishing houses (and their corporate superstructures) that we were discussing—but it was, as I say, gratifying to see how important it was to him to finally be playing in the big leagues, and to know that he had, at last, "made it" in that context.

This, then, led to a discussion of the historical research that had gone into his graphic narrative of the history of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, historical research that was something new to him. To keep *The Plot* as historically accurate as possible,

"*The Spirit Archives* are outselling *The Superman Archives* ."

he had gotten bogged down at several points. The incident he mentioned was visual reference for a Russian military academy circa 1850. What did such a thing look like? Everything had ground to a halt while visual reference was tracked down. I mentioned my own experience with *Melmoth*, trying to track down a picture of the hotel room in Paris where Oscar Wilde had died and my having finally to get Gerhard to make it up from the few descriptions I could find of it. I finally ran across a picture a number of years after I had needed it. I told him about Chester Brown's reply when I had asked him what his next project was going to be after the research-heavy *Louis Riel*.

"Something made up."

He laughed at that.

Then I, perhaps undiplomatically, asked him about his deal with DC Comics to reprint *The Spirit* and all his other works in their entirety and to keep them in print.

"It's going very well. As a matter of fact [DC President] Paul Levitz phoned me a while ago and said, 'Will? Guess what! *The Spirit* is outselling *Superman*.'" He chuckled, and his eyes twinkled at the memory. "*The Spirit Archives* are outselling *The Superman Archives*." Then the twinkle faded a bit. "Unfortunately they aren't doing as well with the Will Eisner Library [the collections of his post-Spirit graphic novels]. They just can't seem to find that right approach or the right venue for selling the graphic novels." It was a bitter pill to swallow. *The Spirit* was kicking *Superman*'s ass, finally. Unfortunately, he was also kicking Will Eisner's post-*Spirit* ass. I told him that I'm in no hurry to write and draw something that has to compete with *Cerebus*.

Suddenly, we were at the hotel.

The Cambridge Suites Hotel is inset from Richmond Street East in the core of downtown Toronto with a lobby entering off a cobblestone courtyard. I had already checked that they had a creditable restaurant on the premises—which turned out to be the four-star Resto Portico restaurant that faced onto Victoria Street.

The next part was kind of funny. We checked in, and Will asked what the plan was, when were we going over to the convention? I had made a point with Pete Dixon, the organizer, that this was an eighty-seven-year-old man that I was picking up at the airport, and I would just be following Will's lead. If he wanted to go over to the convention, we would go over to the convention, but not before he had had something to eat at his own pace and after he saw how he felt at that point. I told Will about that and said it was up to him. We could have a nice relaxing dinner or just grab a quick bite and head on over to the show. The convention's guest services courtesy van would be making trips back and forth all night.

We agreed to meet back down in the lobby in twenty minutes for a quick bite in the restaurant and then call for a ride over to the convention site. When I got to my room, I phoned Pete on his cellphone to tell him the good news. Will was in great shape and champing at the bit to get over to the convention as soon as possible. It was about 6 p.m., and we could be ready for a ride over by about 7:30 for the last hour-and-a-half of the show. I would give him a call.

So, having already made sure that Resto Portico was open and that we would be able to get a table immediately, I was in hurry-up mode when Will arrived down in the lobby, We walked in through the bar area, and Will stopped in his tracks

A Will Eisner/Lou Fine splash page from Uncle Sam Quarterly *2 (1941). Dave Sim: "I was admiring a Lou Fine piece—not this one—that Will had framed on the wall of his living room at the brunch after his surprise eightieth birthday party, and he came up and told me about discovering Japanese brushes in the early forties and trying to get everyone in the Tudor City studio to use them. Unfortunately only Will and Lou Fine were able to maintain the level of control necessary to get a consistent line out of them. 'It was a shame,' he said, businessman to businessman, 'because the Japanese brushes were a lot cheaper. I could've saved a lot of money.'"*

and looked around.

"So," he said. "Shall we sit down and have a drink first?"

I laughed. "Will, I thought you wanted to get over to the convention as soon as possible."

He laughed. "Well, when you said that thing about a nice relaxing dinner, the more I thought about it, the more I thought that sounded good." Inwardly feeling sorry for Pete Dixon who was, at that moment, telling everyone at the CNE Exhibition Grounds that Will Eisner would be here around 7:30, I nonetheless stuck with my original intention

of following Will's lead. A relaxing dinner it would be—but we would compromise and have our drinks at the table.

III

His was a scotch (and water? soda?) and mine a Virgin Caesar. By this point I was about as comfortable with THE Will Eisner as I was ever likely to be, and the most prominent memory I have of The Dinner is of that level of comfort. It was just like having dinner with a friend of many years' standing. I can't make the claim that Will and I were close friends, although others have assured me that that was the case. Al Nickerson, a comic-book inker from Monroe, New York who had written to me in late December mentioning that Will was in hospital and recovering from quadruple bypass surgery, I think, describes my relationship with Will pretty accurately:

"Will was my college teacher for three years while I attended the School of Visual Arts. My earliest memory of Will Eisner was when he said in class (September, 1986), 'I think comic books are far more than two mutants trashing each other.' Heh...I was always a bit intimidated to show Will my work in class. However, one of the nicest things Will ever said to me after reviewing some of my artwork was, 'You have a nice line.' Now, this was the greatest thing an aspiring comic-book inker could hear from one of his heroes. Once, during class, I asked Will about the jam story you and he had done. Will's face lit up at the mention of the story, and he told me how happy he was to work on it."

The *Cerebus Jam* story had been a bit of serendipity. Aware that Will was loathe to revisit The Spirit, I had hoped to inveigle his participation by doing reasonably finished layouts and persuading him just to tighten them up in pencil, and that I would ink the figures, and Gerhard would do the backgrounds. I was, of course, astounded when the pages came back with all of the Dolan and Spirit figures fully inked and in the tight brush style of his late 40s studio look. On the occasions that he mentioned it to me in later years, the impression that I had come away with was that he didn't want to invite unfavourable comparisons between the level of slickness his inking style had possessed back then and the more spontaneous brush line he had evolved for his later graphic novels (which actually tightened up quite a bit by the time of 2001's *The Name of the Game*). But, by doing most of the compositional work in his own style—I'm nothing if not a magpie—he found himself responding (as he told me later) like an old fire-horse who gets a whiff of smoke. It settled, I think, what had been a nagging interior question for him—was it that he didn't *want* to do that late 40s style or was he no longer *capable* of it? I would have my own experience along those same lines with the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* crossover the following year. I had pretty much abandoned Cerebus the Barbarian and had the same nagging interior question—was it that I was *disinterested* in doing it, or was I *incapable* of doing it? Because Kevin Eastman was such a Cerebus the Barbarian enthusiast, I was able to replace his rough sketches and suggested dialogue with the 'real article' and satisfy myself that I still had what it took to do the seminal version of the character. Without Kevin's assistance I would never have tackled the problem, and I would always have had my doubts.

Will and I shared a special affinity for each other, I suspect, because—in addition to being writer-artists—we were also both of us businessmen, so our conversations could range across a wide spectrum of shared interests, experiences, and per-

Left: Sim art from 1974 for Comic Art News & Reviews. *Right: Eisner splash page from 1949.*

spectives. With most artists business is considered, at best, a necessary evil, so any discussion that ventures into proximities of business becomes strained pretty quickly. It first occurred to me at dinner that that reality also had made us both outsiders in our chosen field, having opted for "road less traveled"—and in Will's case with *The Spirit* a road he had traveled alone and which no one had followed him on: incorporating comic books into newspaper syndication. He was an exception in the comic *strip* field and in the comic-*book* field—the only one astride the borderline between the two in a way comparable to that of *Cerebus* which, from the vantage-point of the avant-garde was a mainstream comic book, and from the vantage point of the mainstream was an avant-garde comic book, an overground comic with an underground sensibility or an underground comic with an overground sensibility. When you speak the language and have the experience of two otherwise opposing worlds, you end up being considered an outsider in both. I made a mental note to introduce the idea to him at the first opportunity to see what he would think of it. Meanwhile:

"Elzie Segar's *Popeye* was a big influence on me, particularly the way that he would show a punch being thrown. Popeye was always rooted to the spot twisting his body and swinging his arm with the full weight of that grounded stance behind it, which is, of course, one of the fundamentals of boxing. Everyone else in comics tried to make fighting into a ballet with the fighters jumping around, throwing a punch while balanced on one foot."

The observation sets off a slide show in my mind's eye of classic *Spirit* panels and Segar's *Popeye* panels, thematically linked in a way I had never seen before. That happened a lot at dinner and with Will generally. He would set your thinking off in a new and previously unconsidered direction by introducing connections you hadn't seen before, and you'd miss the next part of his conversation pursuing and then wondering at the new insight he had provided you.

Was Will aware of my work?

Apart from the *Cerebus Jam* experience and the fact that I was doing a 300-issue story (on the panel the next day at Torontocon, he was nice enough to say publicly of the 300-issue series, "He started with an impossible idea and solved it with an incredible performance") there was really no way of knowing and no polite way to ask: "Will, how much of my work have you *read*, and what did you think of it?" He expressed at dinner perhaps the most significant way that he considered me a peer and a contemporary—that we were both aspiring to raise the level of the thematic content of comic books. I tended to see myself in the past tense in that discussion—I had "aspired," and I was now done and awaiting the verdict of history which had (to say the least) not been particularly kind thus far and which was showing no signs of any imminent improvement. And he was quick to cite Frank Miller as another example of someone who had aspirations in the same direction of elevating the content of the medium. I didn't say anything. Content and the innovative refinement of formalist structure to me, are two different things. I think it's safe to say that if Will Eisner saw himself as having an heir as the comic-book medium's preeminent writer-artist—and he had held that status for too long not to have an heir at least in the back of his mind—it was

> **"[*Cerebus Jam* settled the question of whether Eisner] didn't *want* to do that late 40s style or was no longer *capable* of it."**

Frank. It would certainly make sense because of the refinements he had brought to the Eisner storytelling methods starting with his work on *Daredevil*, but I think also because of Frank Miller's preeminence in the field and "clout" (for want of a better term) at the companies he's done work for. Early on Eisner had decided that control of his intellectual property and the business implications of it were paramount to what he wanted to accomplish. If you don't want someone to be changing your work, make sure you have absolute legal control over it. Like any innovator who had hedged his bets in this way, he admired the buccaneer virtuosity of someone who could enter just such a lopsided battle as the on-going war between creator and corporation—as Frank Miller did and continues to do—and to come out on top. As a "primacy of content" advocate, I would have responded by saying that I'm eagerly awaiting Miller's proposed *Jesus* a good deal more than I'm looking forward to, say, further installments of *Sin City*—a little Mickey Spillane goes a long way with me. Even something as layered and nuanced as *Elektra: Assassin* would be preferable in my own frames of reference, but that seemed an impolitic observation to make over dinner with Frank's number one patron.

It wasn't the only area that called for a certain level of artistic diplomacy.

In a real sense Will and I were in each other's way in the debate on graphic novels and what length they needed to be to be described as such. He was never going to do a 500-page graphic novel, so he had a real stake in arguing for a shorter length and maintaining, as he always did, that the point of the graphic novel wasn't the length of the work but the content [as he did on the panel the next day, saying that it "didn't matter if a story was fifty pages or 100 pages or 200 pages"—skewing his argument, understandably, towards his own upper range of story length (although it must be conceded that he hit the 200-page threshold more often than the 100-page threshold as he went along, which is a great testament to his level of aspiration)].

To me—while conceding my own vested interest that it is Ger's and my 500- and 1200-page ox that was in danger of getting gored—that was specious reasoning. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is a great short story, perhaps the greatest of all time, but its superlative content doesn't make it a novel any more than it makes it a TV show. If Will's definition of the graphic novel prevailed, then Ger and I had wasted a lot of years and effort in producing a 6,000 page story that could have more fruitfully been expended in producing sixty real graphic novels.

"You know, it's funny, this history of the term graphic novel," he said at dinner with a glint of satisfaction in his eye. "I came up with it on the spur of the moment. I had gotten an indirect word of interest—a friend of a friend—from a major New York publishing house (as he would say on the panel the next day, the publishing house was Bantam) years and years ago and always having wanted to penetrate that market, I told the publishing executive that I had a property *[A Contract With God]* that I wanted to show him, and he asked me to describe it over the phone. And I told him I called it a graphic novel, and he became very interested and invited me to come in for a meeting. So I walked in with the pages from the book and showed them to him, and he took one look and said, 'This is a comic book. We don't publish this type of material.'" He laughed at the memory. "And that was the end of that."

He had invented the term graphic novel at the age of 60 and was then faced with the problem of the limited number of years that he had left to be productive and how he was going to use that time. He freely confessed that one of his big problems was that everything about the human condition interested him, and he could see for himself exactly how narrow the parameters of most graphic novels were. The vast majority were just serialized superhero stories collected under one cover. The fact that that left all other literary themes and subjects wide open for treatment—with the clock ticking—

"It's safe to say that if Will Eisner saw himself as having an heir as the comic-book medium's preeminent writer-artist...it was Frank [Miller] ."

would be the driving force behind the last twenty-seven years of his life. Every story that he tackled was new and untrammeled territory. It was no surprise that the subject he returned to, time and again, was his own background in 1920s and 1930s New York City while still making occasional forays into the vast reaches of untapped literary territory such as *Sundiata, A Legend of Africa.* It was the New York eras he had lived through that were being lost with each passing year, and he felt an obvious and compelling need—as a member of those eras' dwindling custodial constituency—to document and preserve his recollections of it. The sense of urgency, it seems to me, was what made his choices for him and the sense of urgency compounded itself as his eighties (his *eighties*!) were disappearing behind him. I have no doubt that the inescapable fact that he was now down to his last two or three or (as it turned out) his final graphic novel was the driving force that led to the decision to do *The Plot*, the actual history behind The Protocols of the Elders of Zion hoax. It struck me as a wise choice, and I'm definitely looking forward to reading it.

But it did, to one degree or another, constitute another discussion we couldn't have, a subject that put us at odds sitting across the dinner table from each other. Work was uppermost in his mind, how much work could be accomplished in the limited time left to him. I, on the other hand, was just getting used to not working and to the acceptance of the idea that my work was done (it's an interesting side note that the length of time between the final appearance of *The Spirit* in 1952 and the publication of *A Contract with God* in 1978 was approximately the same span between *Contract* and Will's death and the length of the *Cerebus* project—twenty-six years). There couldn't have been a greater sense of urgency on his part and less of a sense of urgency on my part. I envied him his single-mindedness and, truth be told, his (relatively) imminent mortality. I enjoyed being done with *Cerebus*, and I looked forward to being done, period. I'm sure he envied me my youth (from the sunny side of ninety, fifty looks young) and the years I had remaining to create more work. I envied him his universal popularity and, I suspect, he envied me being unencumbered with his time- and energy-consuming role of Comic Book Elder Statesman. There is a level of human comfort to be had—and that I suspect we both experienced—in participating in just such a social evening between two individuals possessed of so many complementary levels of enviousness. We were both at home in our own skins and both well past the "grass is always greener" stages of our lives.

I complimented him again on *A Contract with God*, the title sequence from the book of the same name. I do think it is in the pantheon of great comic-book stories. Its only nearest competitor, in my mind, is Barry Windsor-Smith's "The Beguiling."

He had only been vaguely interested—which had been a not-unexpected reaction—when I had brought it up in conversation at the tag end of his surprise 80th birthday party at the Museum of Cartoon Art in Boca Raton in 1997. "Not unexpected" because if someone told me that they thought that *Melmoth* (as an example) was in a comparable category, my facial expression would have reflected the same interior thought as had Will's: "What about the *rest* of my work? Where does *it* rank with you?" So this time I tried to explain a little more thor-

Above: a page from A Contract With God.
Right: Sim and Garhard's Eisner tribute for the 1996 Chicago Comicon Program Booklet.

oughly.

"The story can be read a lot of different ways..." I began, my thesis being that it would not be difficult to see the titular Contract with God, having been abused by Frimme Hersh and so ending up in the hands of the young Jew who finds it where Hersh has discarded it in the alleyway as a metaphor for Christianity supplanting rather than supplementing Judaism—which would certainly be a more controversial interpretation than has attached itself to the story over the last twenty-five years.

"You're telling me," Eisner interjected, his eyebrows shooting up. "The first two letters I got on *A Contract with God* came in the same day. One of them raving about the book as a positive portrayal of Jews in comic books and the other one denouncing it as anti-Semitic." He chewed, thoughtfully, and then swallowed. "I should've saved those two letters."

His anecdote buried my insight for relevance (or threw it into sharper relief), but I advanced it anyway. It, evidently, set off within him a train of thought at oblique angles to my intention.

"I believe in God," he said, after a moment's reflection. The statement hung in the air for a few moments as he considered where he was going with that. Thinking that he might be uncomfortable talking about religion, I mentioned my own faith, bridging (as I hope it does) Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Nothing very specific, just a shared confidence that I hoped might engender a shared confidence. "Well, you know, it's a great tradition in Judaism," he smiled, a little roguishly, "that goes back to the beginning that we argue with God." It was one of those insightful moments that comes along only once in a great while. He was referring, I was quite sure, to Abraham's discussion with the Angel of YHWH when he had announced to him the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah ,and Abraham had cajoled him progressively to spare the city if a sufficient number of righteous inhabitants could be found therein, negotiating downward the number of righteous persons that might allow the Cities of the Plain to be spared. I frankly confess that this set off another train of thought in my own mind so that again I missed a great deal of the ensuing narrative.

"If God requires that men honor their agreements, is not God also so obligated?" That chilling moment in "A Contract with God" where Frimme Hersh is "chewing the scenery" in his monologue directed at God—railing at God and accusing God of malfeasance!—while a thunderstorm rages overhead. It was my first choice of a tribute to Eisner for a Chicago Comicon program booklet (everyone else, of course, had done *The Spirit*). I was both appalled and fascinated to see the sudden connection. "But, Will," I wanted to say, "There are...*degrees*, don't you think? Isn't pleading for the lives of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah out of basic human compassion a world away from accusing God of violating His own covenant with men?" It had been Frimme Hersh in collaboration with several rabbis who had drawn up the contract. Who is man

to pretend to define God's obligations? Who is man that he could level such an accusation? From what vantage-point could he do so? My mind performed another quick slide show. The closing chapters of the Book of Job. "Were you there when the world was founded?" The inmates of Auschwitz who held a mock trial of God in the midst of their ordeal and found Him guilty. This mental image was, in turn, immediately contrasted with the Orthodox Muslim knee-jerk response in the face of all debilitating tragedy (such as that suffered by Frimme Hersh with the death of his beloved daughter Rachele): "Allahu Akhbar" loudly and repeatedly proclaimed—"God is Great!"—the underlying motive being that of extreme resistance to the very human temptation to blame God for one's own personal tragedies and misfortunes. To see "arguing with God" as a venerable tradition, it seemed to me, was a good way to set yourself up for a major fall in exactly the way experienced by Frimme Hersh. Rather than tragedy deepening one's faith, it becomes the tipping point into a blasphemous fit of pique. All this passed through my mind in the space of a few seconds. It felt as if I had stumbled on a fundamental schism in the human condition, a foundational fracture in the soul of mankind.

When I drew my attention back to the table, Will was concluding his observations that this had led to.

"I do worry about these things," he said, simply—and to all appearances— imperturbably. "I'm getting old. Everyone I knew is either dead or dying."

I was tempted to ask, "Do you pray, Will?" But that seemed too intrusive a question under the circumstances, too self-righteously evangelical in so purely social a context when posed by a believer to a secular-humanist ("Have YOU ALL Been SAVED by the Lowered?"). But it was a genuine temptation—to what extent was Will's observation about the Judaic tradition of arguing with God centered on his fictional creation, Frimme Hersh, and to what extent did Will Eisner indulge in the venerable tradition of argument with God, himself, in his conscious thoughts and in the secret counsels of his sleep? Was Will Eisner at essence a less overt version of Frimme Hersh? And how less overt in his indictment of God was he? Again there was no polite way to ask. It struck me that he had been in his late twenties when the Concentration Camps had been liberated. He would not have been the first Jew of that generation to turn away from God in the face of the overwhelming tragedy of the Sho'ah, again mirroring what I would see as Frimme Hersh's disproportionate reaction to a human tragedy in his life.

Dinner had come to an end. "You want head over to the convention?" I asked as we sauntered into the lobby. Will turned over the copy of Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* I had given him in advance of our three-way graphic novel panel the next day. He was hypnotized by the prospect of a thick hardcover graphic narrative to dive into, an incarnation of his legacy that he could never have imagined in his wildest dreams as a young man. Of course the same could be said of the convention—a gathering place of devotees of the graphic narrative which, likewise, he could never have imagined in his wildest dreams as a young man. "Naw," he said. "Let's call it a night. We'll get an early start tomorrow." That was fine by me. My first prayer would be around 5:30. We made arrangements to meet for breakfast the following morning at 8:30 and got onto the elevator. Will got off on the third floor, wish-

Here's a rarity: Will Eisner's Captain Savage *featuring some pre-Spirit (and probably pre-*Hawks of the Seas*) art. We stumbled upon this in Eric Fromm's* Nickel Library.

ing me a good night. I wished him the same.

IV

I usually eat breakfast immediately after my first prayer, so I headed down to the second floor breakfast room around 6 am, having decided I would have something to eat then and just have coffee around 8:30 with Will. In between I had a nap—a not unusual occurrence during the summer months when there is barely six hours between the post-sunset and pre-sunrise prayer—and then headed back down around 8:20. Michael Gilbert and Roy Thomas and their wives were having breakfast at a table for four. I poured myself a decaf and dished up a plate of some fresh fruit and took a table for two facing the door. A dealer from Michigan came in with her toddler who was clutching an action figure of some kind and a little while later left with many plates and glasses and cups balanced precariously and her toddler—still clutching the action figure—trailing behind. I went back to the buffet for seconds and stopped by the table to say hello, reminiscing with Roy Thomas about a previous trip to Toronto where he had tapped John Allison for an appearance—with a story entitled "Half-Life" that had been published in the second issue of Toronto's short-lived *Orb* magazine—in the equally short-lived *Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction*, the Marvel black-and-white magazine. "It was an amazing experience," I said, "all of us standing around in a public area with you looking at the original pages in John's display portfolio, and all of us listening to you and thinking, 'Allison's in. Roy Thomas is actually going to publish his story at Marvel.'" It surprised me that Thomas remembered the story in question as vividly as he did—it had been thirty years before—but he summarized the plot and described the last panel and even the punchline of the story ("Nice view, though") for his wife and the Gilberts, before turning back to me.

"So what have you been doing since then?" he wisecracked. It was a very funny line, and all I could do was laugh and flounder for a rejoinder. I went back to my table.

Roy Thomas and Michael Gilbert and their wives departed, and I went back for another decaf. I finished it and asked someone what time it was. About 9:15. Will didn't strike me as a late type. I tried not to think about his observation from the night before. "All of my friends are dead or dying." I went out in the hall where there was a house phone and asked the hotel operator to connect me with his room. The phone rang a number of times, and then the in-house answering service picked up: "The hotel guest you are attempting to contact is not answering...." I hung up and went back and poured myself another decaf. Hoo boy, I thought. Ever the dispassionate problem-solver in these situations, I started thinking about procedures and protocols. Did Pete Dixon have a home number for the Eisners? I assumed that the American Embassy would need to be contacted to find out what the procedure was for transporting a deceased American citizen. Would the preparation of the body be done in Canada, or could the remains be transported in their present state? I had met Ann Eisner only once but that, as far as I know, put me one up on anyone else at the convention. "Mrs. Eisner? My name is Dave Sim. I'm afraid I have some terrible news...." I went back out to the house phone, picked

"And then [Al Capp] looked right at [Eisner]...and said, 'You're never going to make it in this business.'"

up the receiver and then set it down again. I decided I would take the elevator up to the third floor and knock on the door. Repeatedly. I pushed the button and waited. A musical note sounded signaling the elevator's arrival, the doors opened. And there was Will.

"*There* you are," he said. 'Where've you been? I've been down in the lobby waiting to go for breakfast since 8:30."

I laughed. This really was too much. Now I had the disorienting effect of THE Will Eisner compounded by THE Will Eisner Come Back From the Dead. I explained to him that I thought he knew about the breakfast room on the second floor. "I was just on my way up to knock on your door, Will. I thought that...you know...." He winced, visibly, his face draining of emotion, and I dropped the subject like a hot potato. It really was like a minor miracle, though. I poured myself another decaf and grabbed a Danish (this called for a celebration) and took it back to the table and sat there just watching Will as he puttered around at the buffet, pouring himself a coffee, examining the breads and pastries and selecting for himself a nice bagel, watching him scout around for the little packets of cream cheese, watched him find them, watched him putting them on the little plate next to his bagel and then make his way over to the table. It was THE Will Eisner. And he was ALIVE.

"You're ALIVE, Will," I wanted to say, over and over, at the sheer wonder of it all. And it was the only thing I couldn't say. So, I fell back on the question I hadn't gotten around to asking him at dinner—what he thought of my "outsider theory." Did he feel like an outsider in the business?

"Very much so," he said, breaking the bagel apart with his fingers and dipping his knife into the little packet of cream cheese and then jamming the cream cheese—hard— into the broken bagel's soft interior cupped in his other palm. Where did you learn to do that, Will? I wondered to myself, loud enough that I could scarcely believe he didn't hear it. Where did you learn to put cream cheese on a bagel like that? Did your father show you how to

do it that way? Have you been doing it that way since the 1920s? Is that the way you did it in the Tudor City studio? "Very much so," he said, taking a bite of the bagel with the perfectly aligned, even regularity of his upper denture plate. "In fact, the time I felt that the most was when I told Jerry Iger that I wanted out of the Eisner & Iger studio partnership. He was a pugnacious little guy to begin with, which was good—that's what you need on the business side of things. But he was very upset with me. 'We've got a good thing going here,' he told me, 'What do you want to give it up for?' And I explained to him my reasons—that I wanted to do a strip for an adult audience, I wanted to do something of quality, and I wanted to devote all of my time to it. And that just made him angrier. It was bad enough that I wanted to break up the studio, but he thought that I was doing it for very bad reasons. And I could see how he saw it, but he couldn't see the way I saw it. He just saw me throwing a good lucrative business away for lousy reasons."

Another Eisner/Fine splash page from Uncle Sam Quarterly 2.

He went on to tell the story about the Mob and the towel supply company, which I actually read someplace else recently (*Wizard* magazine, maybe?) and it was only when I read it there that I remembered Will telling the story in the second floor breakfast room, because I had just become hypnotized, watching him mashing that cream cheese into his bagel. I just sat there thinking

You're Will Eisner.

And you're alive.

V

There are few more festive experiences than riding to a convention with Will Eisner. The younger guys tend to clam up (if they've had any previous experience), saving their personality for the long and—for cartoonists used to performing their daily tasks in splendid and mute isolation—strange day of non-stop schmoozing ahead. But you could see Will becoming more alive, with each passing mile, charming the driver of the courtesy van, myself, and whomever else was there in the vehicle with us. He was not only the sole custodian of so many memories, he was also the guy who had single-handedly carried the comic book medium from its decades-long reviled state to the promised land of real-world credibility and community. He was like a kid on his way to the world's biggest candy store, joking and reminiscing, getting warmed up. One example will suffice, a description of a National Cartoonists Society dinner he had attended in 1945 ("I know it was 1945 because I was still wearing my uniform"):

"I was sitting next to Al Capp and he turned to me—Al Capp was the kind of a guy when he talked or laughed the walls shook around you—so he turns to me and he says, "WHO ARE YOU?" (much laughter). And I said…in a very small voice...apologetically..."Will Eisner." And he says to me, "WHAT DO YOU DO?" And I said, "Well," I said, "I do a comic. A...uh...comic called *The* uh *Spirit*." And he looks at me for a minute and finally he says, "OH YEAH," he says, "I CAUGHT THAT IN *THE PHILADELPHIA RECORD*....IT WAS PRETTY GOOD." And then he looked right at me, very intensely for a few seconds and then he says, "YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO MAKE IT IN THIS BUSINESS—YOU'RE TOO F---ING NORMAL."

I got him to repeat the story on the panel we did later that afternoon with Chester Brown ("I'll clean it up a bit" he said—he changed it to "too goddamned normal.") and unexpectedly, he went on to elaborate on his first associations with the National Cartoonists Society.

"Later, in another meeting at the National Cartoonists Society I was standing around and there was Rube Goldberg sitting right there. He was an old man at this point, with a cane, and I went over and introduced myself—I was a real fanboy at this time—and I said, 'I'd like to talk to you about this meeting because I think this is an art form, a literary art form...' and he said, 'Bull. S---, boy!' bringing his cane down sharply and he said, '*We're* vaudevillians. *You're* a vaudevillian. You tell people jokes and stories. Don't get any big ideas.' I walked away. When I started out, [the NCS] was the comic world, these guys were the comics aristocracy. These were wealthy men. Rube Goldberg told me that—in 1915 or thereabouts, around the time when I was born—he was already making fifty thousand a year because they had just discovered syndication, something that was very new at the time. Fifty thousand a year at that time in today's money, well, you would be adding about three or four zeroes after that. These were very wealthy men, very widely circulated, and they were very powerful culturally. Al Capp was on the cover of *Time* or *Life* magazine; Rube Goldberg, you'll find his name in the dictionary. The peak of *The Spirit's* circulation was five million, and that was considered nothing [at the NCS]. Nothing very serious, anyway.

"They were very influential people—they created the stereotypes that the immigrants of this [sic] country lived by. The daily strips functioned as a short course in assimilation for the immigrants that were coming in. If you look back at the history of the daily strip both here in Canada and in the United States, you'll discover that they reflected the path of the immigration. For example *The Yellow Kid*—who was the first major comic-strip character—represented the Irish immigrants who were coming at the time in the late 1800s. They were coming in from Ireland in great droves. Then, later on the Germans were coming in, and you have *The Katzenjammer Kids*. Then you had a period when the Irish were beginning to find a place in society, so you had *Bringing Up Father*—Jiggs and Maggie—what was called the "Lace Curtain Irish," and then you had a Jewish comic strip when the Jews were coming in, called *Abe Kabibble** by Harry Hershfeld."

Sim: This story might be apocryphal, but I don't think it is. Denis Kitchen, at a comic-book convention, brought you over to show you, "Here's what's going on in comics now, Will: here's 'underground comix'" and—unfortunately—the first one that you picked up and flipped open to check out what was inside and...I don't even know who it was who had done it, but it was definitely one of those underground comix that would spin the propeller on your beanie...

Eisner: Raunchy, raunchy stuff. It was an epiphany for me. Actually it was the thing that started me back again, because I had spent the twenty-five years before that as a publisher producing very straight stuff—trying to sell clean stuff, legitimate stuff to schools. Always in the back of my mind was the idea that "this medium has a literary capacity," and one of the things that struck me about the underground guys—I was introduced to Denis Kitchen, a guy with long hair and a scraggly beard and a couple of other guys standing around him...glassy-eyed...and they were smoking very funny-smelling cigarettes *[laughter]* and they laughed at the wrong time *[laughter]*—

Sim: A *lot*. At the wrong time. *[laughter]*

Eisner: —was that the artwork that they were doing, while it was primitive was, in my mind, real literature. Because what they were doing was taking on the Establishment. They were dealing in subject matter—yes, they were talking about sex and yes, they were talking about drugs—but they were taking on the culture, and they were dealing with a social problem of the moment, which was something that comics had never done before. Comics' function at that time—which included Harvey Kurtzman, who was doing brilliant stuff—they were [just] telling stories, they were entertaining.

Sim: They were entertaining Mom, Dad, and the kids.

> "The daily strips functioned as a short course in assimilation for the immigrants that were coming in."

Eisner: They were getting an older audience, too, but the older audiences were just reading it for entertainment, for enjoyment. These [the underground] guys were fighting [for] a sociological cause. And I said, "My God, here it is! It's *time*." As a matter of fact, fortunately—I was a suit at that time, I was the CEO of a publishing company—I *sneaked* down to that convention because I didn't want anyone at the publishing company to know that I had been a comic-book artist before this. At any rate, when I got back, fortunately I had an opportunity to sell the company about a month or two months later, and that started me on this new road. As I had said to myself, "Wow. It's *here, now*. The time has come." So I owe the underground comic for what impelled me in this new direction. In fact, I at-

*The strip was actually called *Abie the Agent*. Abe Kabibble had first appeared as a minor character in Hershfeld's strip *Desperate Desmond* and basically took over in much the same way that Popeye would later in Segar's *Thimble Theater*.

tribute to the underground the rise of the graphic novel.

Only on a panel with Will Eisner could you comfortably move from a discussion of a National Cartoonists Society meeting from 1945 that involves Rube Goldberg ["adj. (1942) accomplishing by complex means what seemingly could be done simply <a kind of *Rube Goldberg* contraption…with five hundred moving parts—L.T. Grant>; also: characterized by such complex means"] to the height of the underground comix movement of the mid-1970s and to have it seem so effortless and natural a transition.

VII

It was shortly after the panel had ended that I was back at my table, set up next to Will—who would sign books for a while and then dash off to see what was happening elsewhere in the dealer's room or to have something to eat in the green room. This was one of the times when he was off somewhere else, and I was talking and signing and sketching for a small line-up of people using my venerable trick of doing better sketches and having longer conversations based on how long the line is. The shorter the line, the better the sketches and the longer the conversation. It amazed me that I even fooled a wily veteran like Will Eisner with this trick. Towards the end of the show he groused good-naturedly that I could stop—anytime now—showing off to him how popular I am. "Will, it's been the same six people for the last hour-and-a-half." No one ever believes me, because no one ever checks to see if it's the same people waiting in line. They just assume that you always have a line-up of people eager to get your autograph. It's a very basic trick, but it works very well.

Anyway, there I was signing and sketching and talking away and suddenly Jim Waley—actually he goes by James Waley now, but he will always be Jim

"Ed Furness is the Will Eisner of Canada."

Waley to me, my former boss in 1976 at Toronto's *Orb* magazine (which I mentioned earlier)—there at my side with an old gentleman who seemed a little the worse for wear and tear, to put it mildly. I was only half-listening and trying to pay attention to my sketch when Jim mentioned the man's name, and I turned around and shook hands and said, "It's nice to meet you." And he said, "Actually we've met before." "Oh?" I asked, trying to recover from my social gaffe. "Where was that?" At the Brant County Museum in Brantford, Ontario. I thought back. "The only older gentleman I had met at that event had been Canadian comics legend Ed Furness"

Freelance *7, with art almost certainly by Ed Furness*

was what I thought and what I had been about to say.

"This is Ed Furness, Dave."

I tried to conceal my surprise and well, there was really no help for it. This poor fellow was just a mere shadow of the person I had met (how many years before?—I suddenly realized it was about a dozen years, and Ed Furness had been in his early eighties back then). Compounding my faux pas, I asked him how he was doing and he, literally, began to vibrate with rage and spat out something about how wretched it was to live long enough to become a piece of walking human wreckage. Well, that sounded more like Ed Furness all right. Never one for sugar-coating a subject, he's quoted in John Bell's *Canuck Comics* as saying that, as a kid, "I conned my dad into paying for a correspondence course in cartooning. A complete waste of his money and my time."

"I realize I'm pulling some strings, here," Jim interrupted. "But, Ed really, really wants to meet Will Eisner. Is there some way that you could…?"

"Oh, sure," I said. It was as if Jim had asked, "Is there some way that I can help you get your foot out of your mouth, there, Dave?" "Oh, definitely, that will be no problem at all." Mr. Furness looked as if Jim was literally holding him up. I moved my chair over a bit—I never use it myself, I have to be up high, or the sketches come out crooked—and invited Canadian comics legend Ed Furness to take a load off, Will Eisner should be back any minute. Then began a balancing act as I tried to pay attention to what I was drawing, listen to what the person in front of me (who had been waiting for the better part of an hour) was asking and answering them intelligently, all the while keeping an eye out

for Will. One way or the other I would have to speak with him before he engaged the attention of the first person waiting in line for his return. Past that point it would be too awkward to try the plan I was hatching mentally. It was a nerve-wracking five minutes or so, and then Jim said, "I think this is Will Eisner, now." Sure enough it was—headed straight for his table from two o'clock on the dial. As discretely as I could, I asked the person I was doing a sketch for to excuse me for just a moment, gestured for Jim to get Mr. Furness up on his feet, told them both, "Here we go," and simultaneously moved over to intercept Will. "Will," I said, "I'd like for you to meet Ed Furness, one of the pioneer Canadian comic book artists of the 1940s. He used to do a comic called *Freelance*. He's the Will Eisner of Canada."

[This wasn't as hyperbolic as it sounded. As Robert Macmillan documented in his essay in *Canuck Comics*, Anglo-American, the company that had published Furness' work, had expanded rapidly, faster than it could develop an experienced staff to handle all of the needed art. With his characteristic frankness, Furness had recalled, "Production is a hungry master. It just devours you."

Under the pressure of production demands, Ed Furness developed a system based on his animation experience. In it, Furness laid out the pages. As the technique of the illustrators improved, these layouts became more and more sketchy. They were then given to Betty Mercer, who did the lettering for Anglo-American's entire output. The next person to receive the layouts penciled and inked the principal characters. They then moved to another illustrator, who did secondary characters, and finally to Malcolm Fleming, who did all the backgrounds. As time passed, this approach embraced more and more of the company's production until finally all of the material, including Freelance, was done by this method.

Whether he had been aware of Eisner & Iger or the Tudor City studio of the 1940s at the time—or not until years later—it's not hard to see why Ed Furness would've seen Will Eisner's *Spirit* as the "shining city on the hill" of collaborative comic book work.]

Will turned, beaming towards Ed Furness, and shook both his hands. "Well, it's a great pleasure to meet you." You want to talk about pulling strings—I leaned in close as Will was gripping both of Ed Furness' hands and said, "Would it be all right with you if Mr. Furness sat at your table and signed with you for a while?" Will arched an eyebrow, caught the urgency in my look and, without missing a beat, said "Why, I'd be delighted." I thought Ed Furness was going to have a stroke on the spot. I've never seen a human being look so pleased to meet another human being. Jim and I moved my chair over next to Will's and carefully eased Mr. Furness down into it. I then turned and explained to everyone waiting in line for Will that this was Ed Furness, the co-creator of *Freelance Comics*, one of the old "Canadian Whites" (as the black-and-white wartime books were called), and that he would be signing autographs with Will for anyone who was interested. I looked down at the tremors convulsing Mr. Furness' hands, and it seemed unlikely that he could even hold a pen, let alone sign an autograph. He looked up at me with a gleam in his eye and said, in a newly strengthened voice, 'Well, I'll TRY to, anyhow." And he did. God bless 'im, he signed away like a convention veteran for a good forty minutes or so while his daughter snapped pictures and he and Will swapped cartooning stories from sixty years ago. Someone even found some original copies of *Freelance* for him to sign.

Ed Furness was only seven years older than Will—94 to Will's 87—but the contrast in their respective physical conditions couldn't have been greater. Shaking hands with him, Will looked as if

Will Eisner and Ed Furness sign comics at the 2004 Toronto Comicon.

he were trying very hard not to break him accidentally. Was James Waley exaggerating the level of importance that Will Eisner had in the life of Ed Furness?

As I've said, Ed Furness is nothing if not the soul of honesty. When Jim Waley had e-mailed him in early January that Will Eisner had passed away, he had e-mailed back:

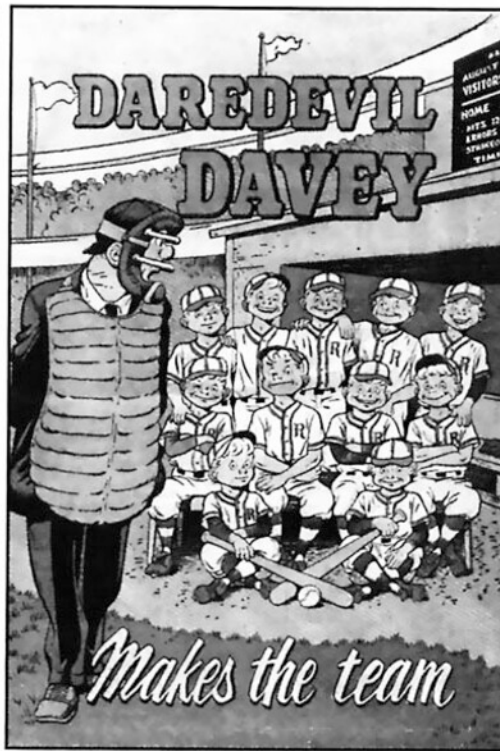
"Why couldn't it have been *me*, instead?"

VIII

Another obscure item with Eisner art. It doesn't have anything specifically to do with Dave's remembrance, but we wanted to get it somewhere in this issue, and here's where we had a little space.

It was a couple of weeks after the sad news of January 3 that I heard from Pete Dixon that the Sunday of the show, things being a little slow, Will had expressed an interest in seeing some of Toronto before it was time for him to fly back to Florida, and that Ron Kasman, one of the organizers of the original Cosmicons at York University back in 1972, had volunteered to drive him around and show him the sights. As Ron said, the Big Building Tour—the CN Tower, Skydome, Toronto City Hall—in his view, was out. Will had lived most of his life in New York City. It would be carrying coals to Newcastle. The comicshop tour was out as well. What possible interest would Will Eisner have in seeing another dozen comic-book stores? As Ron saw it that left only one sensible thing: the Jewish Tour. I laughed when Ron told me that in a phone interview. "What did he say to that?" Ron laughed. "He said, 'I know Jews.'"

"He asked me what my dad did. My dad was a tailor. It fits."

"We went by Lake Ontario, which he referred to as an ocean" (I laughed), "I told him it was the twentieth largest lake in the world and tried to give him an idea of what Toronto is like. So I drove him up Spadina [Avenue], and I told him that was where the Jews first came when they came to Toronto. I told him that in 1933, Toronto was 80% Anglo-Saxon and 20% "Other" and that, of that 20%, the largest "Other" group were Jews. Back then if someone was Hungarian or someone was from Greece or if anyone was from a Mediterranean or Eastern European country—in Toronto—they were considered Jews. He found that very interesting. So I took him up Spadina and showed him the Rag District. I also told him that Canada was not the Promised Land for the Jews, America was. The Jews who came to Canada came first to Montreal, and if they had another ten dollars—we're talking 1933, again—ten dollars would've gotten them to Toronto. Toronto was the jump-off point for New York, which was where they wanted to go. The lucky ones made it there. Many of my family members ended up in New York. I tried to show him that this [Toronto] is what we got, but it isn't what we wanted. This was what we settled for."

Why was that? I asked. Why was America and not Canada the preferred destination? Was it the class prejudice that went hand-in-glove with the British Empire?

"I don't really know. Mordecai Richler discussed this sort of thing and said that one view of Judaism is to look at anything that's happening in the world and to have a preferred outcome based on What would be best for the Jews? For instance, if Toronto is playing Montreal in the Stanley Cup, what team winning the Stanley Cup would be best for the Jews? And Richler said that it would be better if Montreal won because it would leave Canada more divided, more power would go to a minority and the majority—the English—as a consequence would ignore the Jews."

It's not hard to see the origins of just such an attitude in the history of oppression that the Jews have suffered. When historically you know that a pogrom can come up out of nowhere, your national life would be bound to center on just such reading of auguries in every aspect of daily life.

"America was the great melting pot, and most Jews in Europe just wanted to get out at that time. Wherever they could go to was fine by them, and they would try to get over to America, where the streets were paved with gold. To this day, the largest Jewish city in the world is New York. This is the sort of thing we talked about on the Jewish Tour. I took him over to Kensington, where the new immigrants are today, and he found it quite fascinating and said that it reminded him in some ways of the Soho area [of New York]. We turned the corner and went to the corner of Avenue [Road] and Bloor, and I told him if he squinted his eyes and didn't look too closely, it would look somewhat like New York. We think of ourselves, I told him, as the Little Apple. In the 1980s when the real estate prices were going way up, we were comparing ourselves to New York constantly. He found this interesting. We went through Yorkville. He talked about the health care system and how different it was here. I remember

that he was not correctly informed about our health care system, but I don't remember the details at this point. Well, as you know, he's a very clever, interesting, and interested man..."

Clever, interesting, and interested enough that we were discussing him in the present tense. To discuss Will Eisner was to have Will Eisner come back to life in a very real way.

"...so he wanted to know what was going on. He wanted to talk, and he wanted to listen, and he wanted to learn. I remember that as we were driving through Yorkville, he talked about his time in Vietnam in a helicopter doing drawings, so I think that I pictured myself for a moment as his helicopter pilot, driving us through Yorkville.

"He didn't talk much about his art, though. Not that I really wanted him to, I just wanted this to be a tour of Toronto. I'm sure he'd been talking about his art all weekend. He said that photos were for finding how many buttons were on a uniform, and that's very close to a direct quote. Don't use a photo unless you need to find out how many buttons are on a uniform, but apart from that don't use photos when you're drawing comic books."

I had to smile about that. He had been dead for several weeks, and it was as if he still wanted to argue about our differing viewpoints on creating comic books.

"He said that he had a good visual memory and that he could now draw Toronto. He said he couldn't draw any specific building, but he could draw Toronto. It would look like Toronto. It would have the air of Toronto about it. He also commented that his wife read comics before she looked at them, and that he had to keep in mind the two kinds of...viewers can we call them?"

Viewers versus readers. People who look at comic books first and then read them as opposed to people who read comic books first and then look at them. It was a very interesting point, and I was glad I had my tape recorder running, because Will had done it to me again, coming up with an interesting concept that sent me off in another mental direction from the thread of the conversation.

"Yeah. And I had never thought about that at all. I read the words, and for me the illustrations literally illustrate the words."

You'll go back and look at the pictures later if something attracted your eye, but for you, comic books are a purely narrative form.

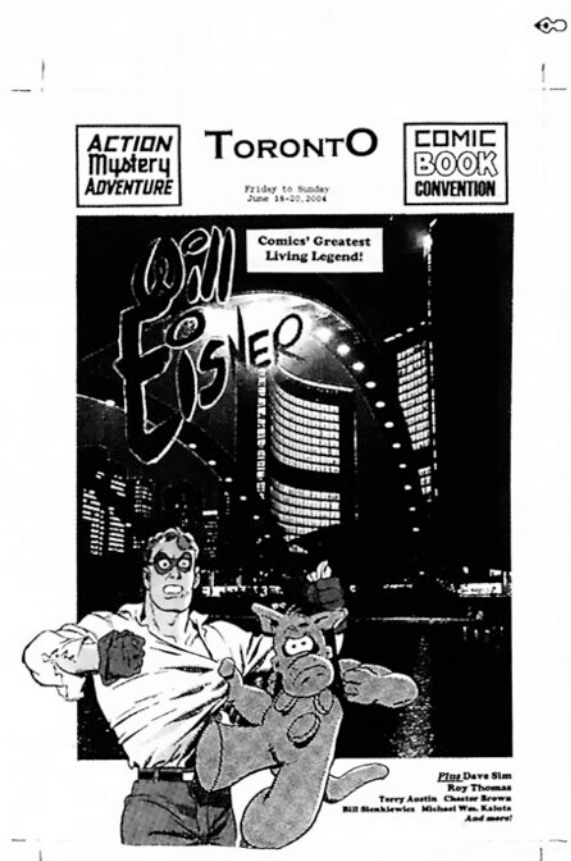
"Yes, exactly. And for other people, the words illustrate or amplify the pictures. I never looked at it that way. It was interesting hearing that from him.

"And we got back to the convention and—it was a little thing—but he got out of the vehicle, and there was someone there coming up behind him, wanting to get into the convention, and he opened the door for them. Here you've got this man in his eighties who is [Ron laughs] the pride and glory of the convention, and he's holding the door for someone much younger than him.

"To me, he was a little bit like what he said about Toronto. He said, 'I have a non-specific view of Toronto, but I know what Toronto is like. I can draw Toronto. Not any particular building, but Toronto.'"

"What I got was an impression of a decent man, a gentleman—what a Jew would call a 'mensch,' but I don't have a lot of specifics. He was a nice guy, he listened to me, and I listened to him for a couple of hours. Comics were far apart from it: the comics came into the conversation now and then, and I was very impressed by him as an individual. Holding the door open for someone much, much younger than himself really punctuated that impression for me.

"I spoke to Al Williamson once, and when I was there, someone called Williamson a genius. Williamson said, 'When I invent a cure for cancer, I'll be a genius; right now I'm a really good comic-book artist.' Eisner didn't say that, but Eisner left the same impression. 'I know what I've done, I know how important it is. And I'm not full of myself.' I'm a good funnybook drawer, I'm proud of it, I certainly haven't wasted my life, but I'm not going to pretend I'm a Nobel Prize Winner for you. I'm not going to act like some strange Hollywood movie star."

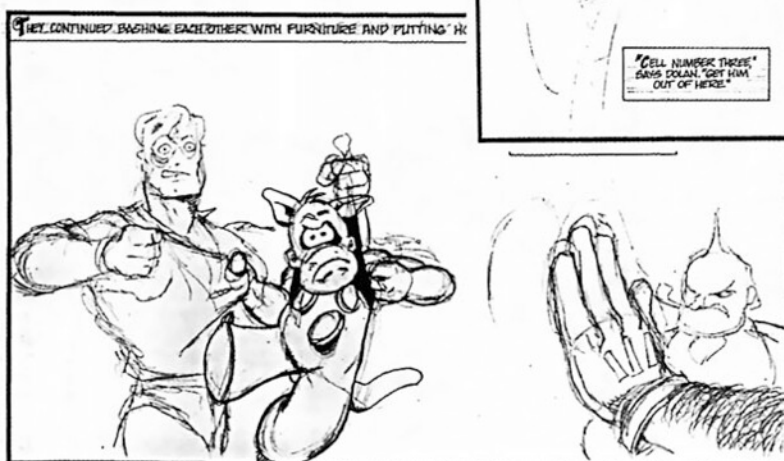
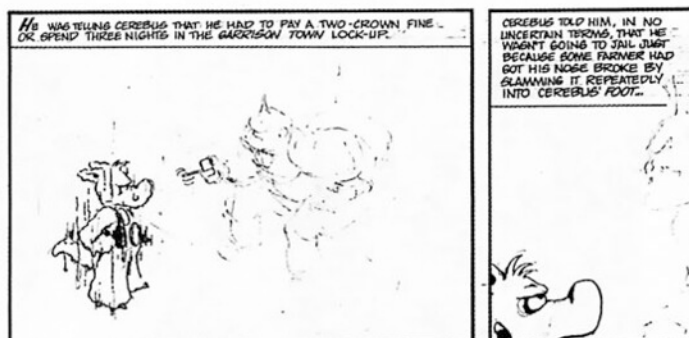
Ed Furness, Canada's Greatest Freelance, *passed away Wednesday April 20 at around midnight, ten days before he was to receive a Hall of Fame plaque at the First Annual Canadian Comic Book Creator Awards (see back cover). Dave Sim, Craig Miller, and John Thorne extend our condolences to his daughter Carole and all of his family, friends, fans, and well-wishers.*

Cerebus Jam

③

In the early eighties, Dave Sim collaborated with various comic book artists on short Cerebus stories. These began as back-ups in the *Swords of Cerebus* paperback collections. In 1985, four stories appeared in the first (and only) issue of *Cerebus Jam*. Later the occasional feature moved to the back of *Cerebus*.

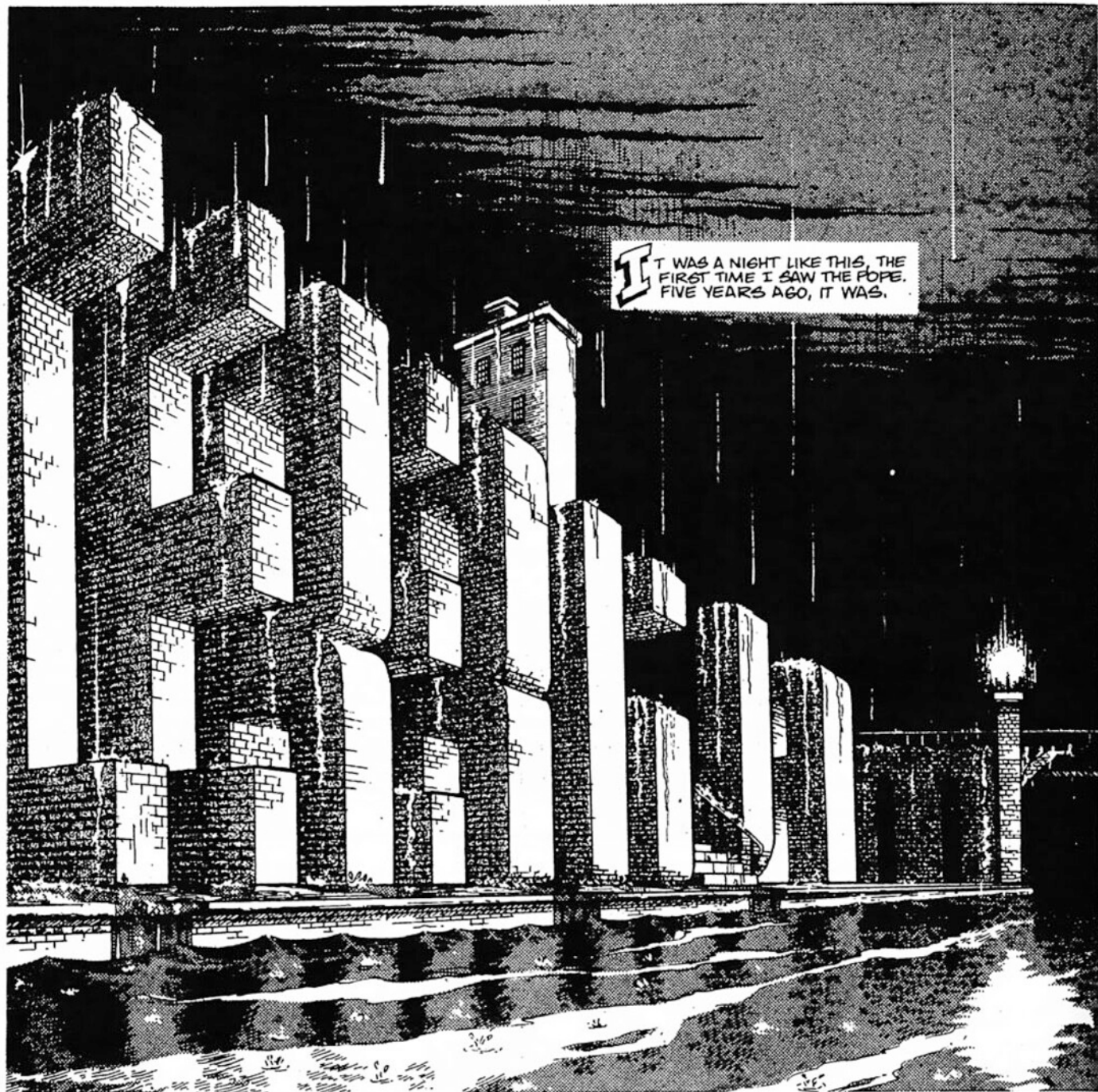
Cerebus Jam 1 contained a four-page story featuring Cerebus, the Spirit, Sheriff Dolan, and Will Eisner himself.

As Dave explained in his introduction (and reiterates in this issue's "My Dinner With Will"), he laid out the story and hoped that Eisner would simply tightened up the Spirit and Dolan figures. But when the pages came back, those figures were fully inked. Eisner said that he "felt like a kid again and got carried away."

We present here the original story (for which Gerhard provided the backgrounds), along with three of the pages in their pencilled form before they were sent to Eisner.

Following Cerebus Contest #1!

In wading through piles of material to prepare for this Will Eisner Tribute Issue, we stumbled across an item we'd completely forgotten about. It turns out that *Cerebus Jam* was *not* the only team-up of Cerebus and the Spirit. They appeared together on a cover!

The first reader who sends us the name of this comic book or magazine will receive an autographed copy of *Cerebus Zero*, complete with a small head sketch of Cerebus by Dave. The reader will also get his name in **BIG BOLDFACE TYPE** in our *FC* 5 announcement! Woo!

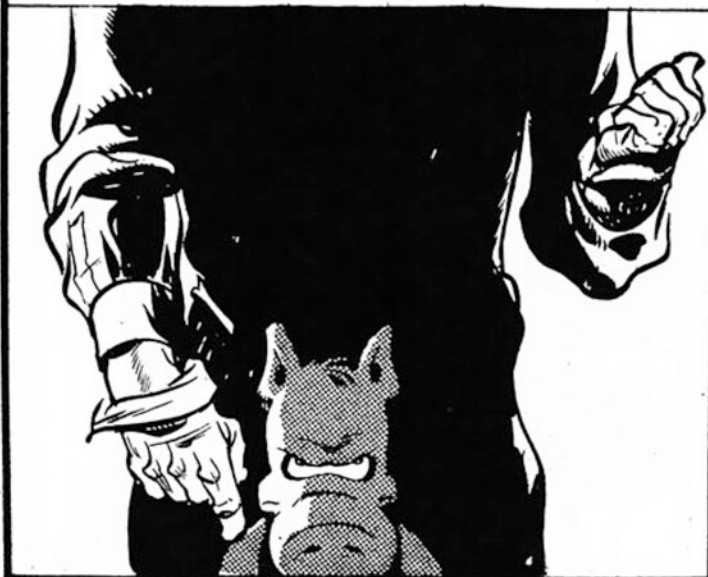
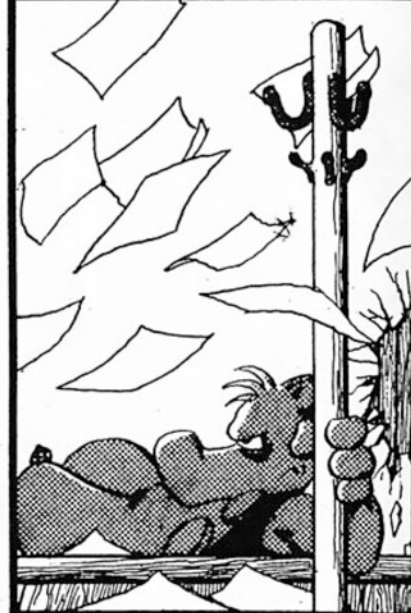
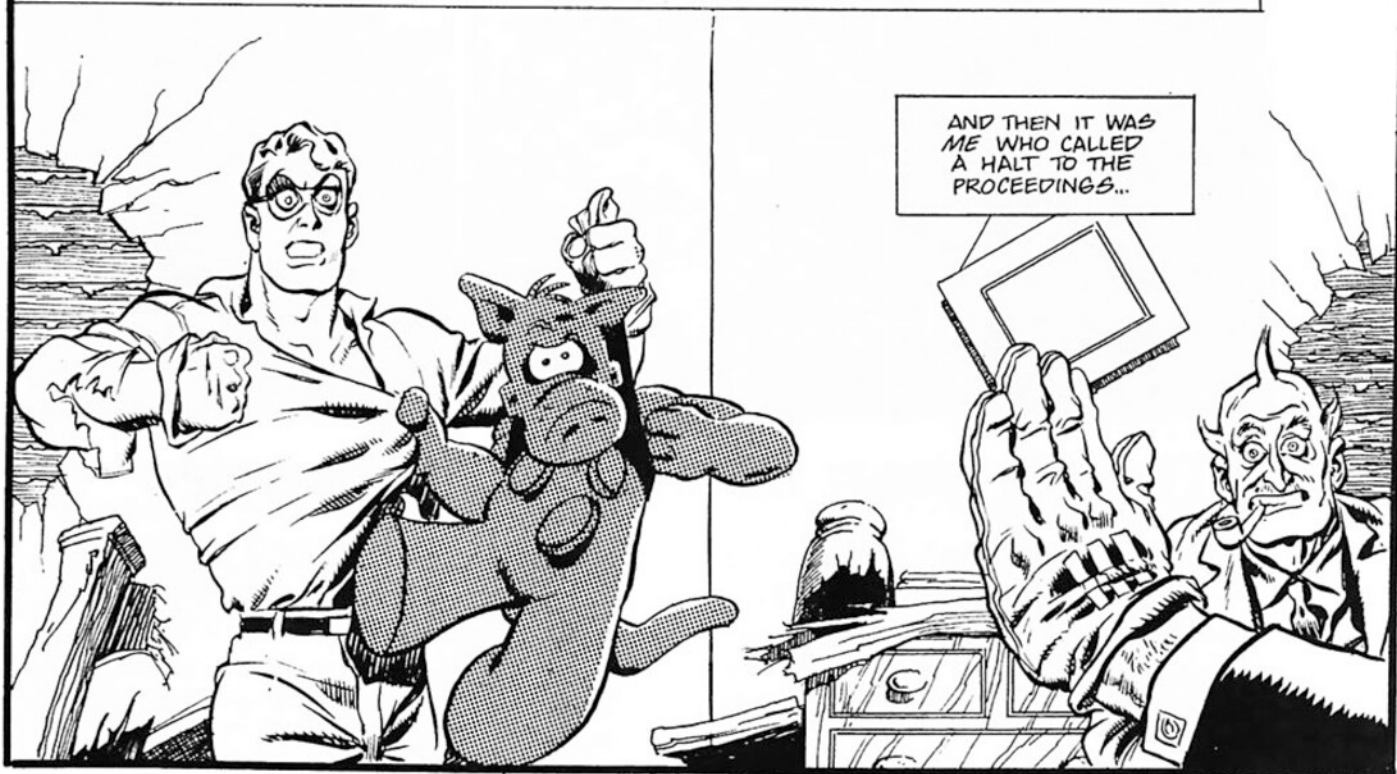
Okay, everybody ready? Set? Go!

IT WAS A NIGHT LIKE THIS, THE FIRST TIME I SAW THE POPE. FIVE YEARS AGO, IT WAS.

HE WAS TELLING CEREBUS THAT HE HAD TO PAY A TWO-CROWN FINE OR SPEND THREE NIGHTS IN THE GARRISON TOWN LOCK-UP.

CEREBUS TOLD HIM, IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS, THAT HE WASN'T GOING TO JAIL JUST BECAUSE SOME FARMER HAD GOT HIS NOSE BROKE BY SLAMMING IT REPEATEDLY INTO CEREBUS' FOOT...

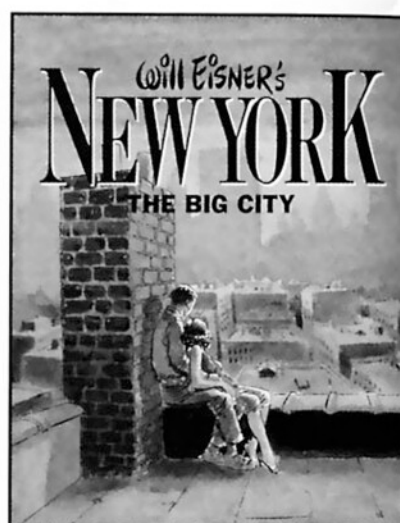
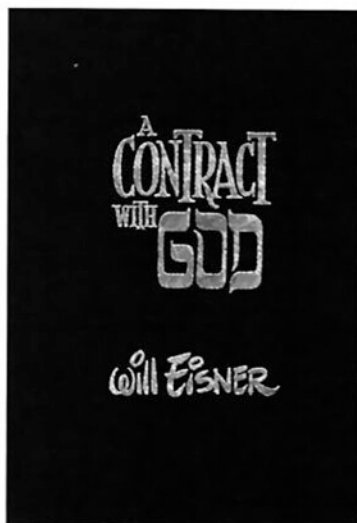
NOW, DOLAN, HE HAD THIS FREELANCE STRONG-ARM HE KEPT AROUND THE PLACE... A FELLA WHAT CALLED HIMSELF THE SPIRIT OR THE WRAITH OR SOME SUCH...
HE WAS BIG AS A PRIZE BULL ... AND ALMOST AS SMART, SOME SAID, THO' I DON'T RECOLLECT ANYONE TELLING 'IM THIS TO 'IS FACE.

"CELL NUMBER THREE," SAYS DOLAN. "GET HIM OUT OF HERE."

I FIGURE CEREBUS MUST BE SENSITIVE ABOUT HIS HEIGHT, BECAUSE WHEN THE BIG GUY SAID, "LET'S GO, SHORTY..."

THE SOUND OF CEREBUS' FOOT MAKING CONTACT WITH *THE SPIRIT'S* KNEE WAS LIKE DRY KINDLING HITTING A BONFIRE...

THEY CONTINUED BASHING EACH OTHER WITH FURNITURE AND PUTTING HOLES IN THE PLASTER A WHILE...
AND THEN IT WAS ME WHO CALLED A HALT TO THE PROCEEDINGS...

...BY PAYING CEREBUS' FINE MYSELF. DOLAN WASN'T TOO PLEASED, OF COURSE.
YE FINES

THE SPIRIT WAS BESIDE HIMSELF, AND CEREBUS, OF COURSE, HE JUST LEFT WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A THANK-YOU. WHICH WOULD PROBABLY HAVE BOTHERED SOME FOLKS

BUT I'VE BEEN KEEPING THINGS CLEAN FOR A LOT OF YEARS...
WILL EISNER

...AND IF THERE'S ANYTHING I DON'T NEED IT'S A LOT OF EXTRA WORK...

The Will Eisner Library: a Brief Overview

Current Will Eisner fans probably know about DC's ongoing set of deluxe reprints of the Spirit stories from the beginning in *The Spirit Archives*. But there is much more to the man's career. Here's a quick survey of most of the major books that contain his work.

Graphic Novels

A CONTRACT WITH GOD (1978) - Arguably the first graphic novel, *A Contract With God* would forever change the face of comics and catapult Will Eisner from a seminal creator in the comics world to seminal creator in the realm of literature. The themes and settings in this book—ordinary people struggling in the slums and tenements of Depression Era New York—would pop up over and over in Eisner's works. In fact, Dropsie Avenue is specifically named in the title story and later would become a graphic novel of its own. Eisner's art is flawless throughout. His mastery of storytelling is apparent as art and text meld perfectly to lead your eye around a page and to arouse deep-seeded emotions at the creator's whim. No word is wasted, and no line is superfluous. The fact that these stories, like many of Eisner's tales, read just as well, and feel just as fresh, today as when created is a testament to the man's keen observation of human nature.

SIGNAL FROM SPACE (later retitled *Life on Another Planet)* (1983) - Eisner's attempt at a science-fiction story still does not stray far from the human point-of-view that became his mainstay. A signal from outer space is received, and all of mankind must now deal with the fact that we are not alone in the universe. Eisner does a wonderful job of showing just how we might react if this actually happened from the first man to find it on up to the government's acceptance that the message is real.

NEW YORK THE BIG CITY (1986) - Eisner's love for New York is evident on each and every page of this stunning graphic novel. There are close to seventy different stories told within these pages, and each story fits neatly into one of nine chapters such as "Windows," "Walls," "Stoops," and "The Block." A perfect melding of character and setting really gives the reader a feel of what life is like in the big city. Interestingly enough, there are several stories told in actual grid panels, something Eisner usually did not do in his stories. A quote from Alan Moore sums up Will Eisner and his career beautifully: "There is no one quite like Will Eisner. There never has been, and on my more pessimistic days, I doubt there ever will be."

THE DREAMER (1986) - My personal favorite of all of Eisner's graphic novels. Not quite truth, but definitely not fiction, *The Dreamer* follows a young man through his trials and tribulations of attempting to break in to the comics world in the 1930s. One gets to witness a semi-fictional, firsthand account of the legendary Eisner/Iger studio and, if a keen eye is kept, one will spot such comic luminaries as Lou Fine and Jack Kirby. The scene where Jack Kirby, a man of diminutive stature at best, forces a "made-man" out of the studio is unforgettable.

THE BUILDING (1987) - As evident in other works such as

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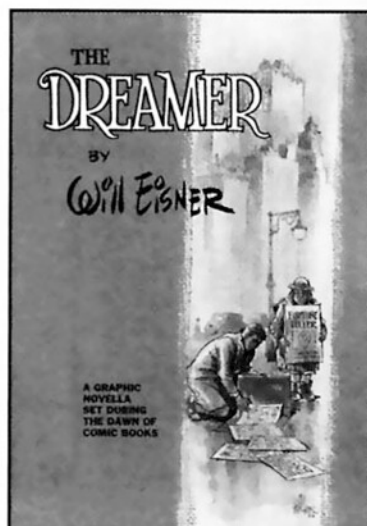
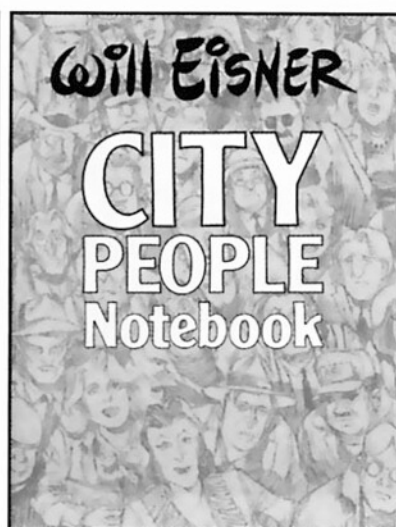
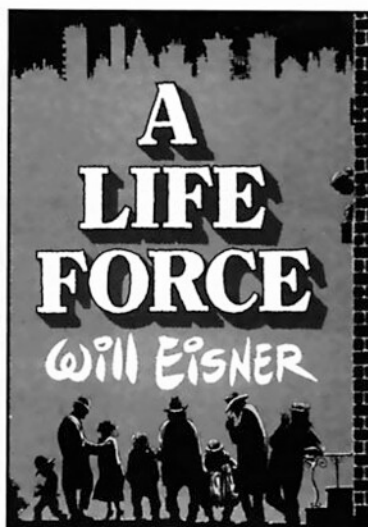
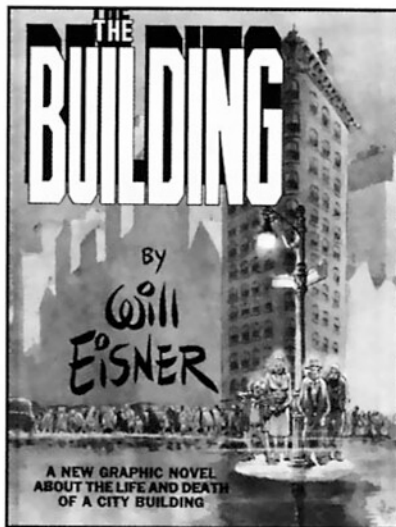
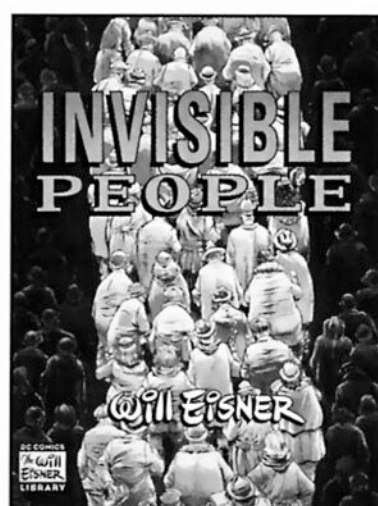
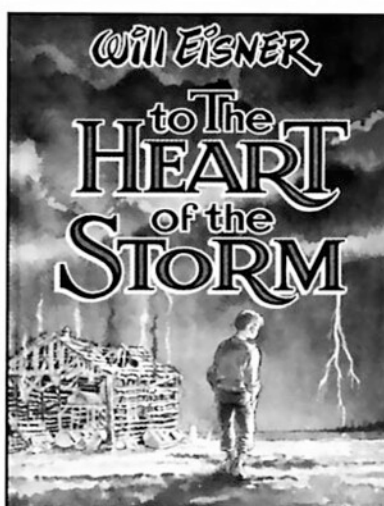
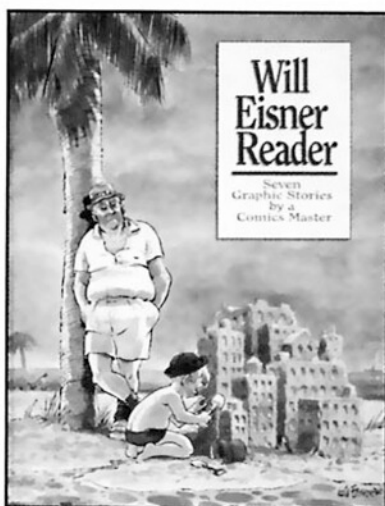
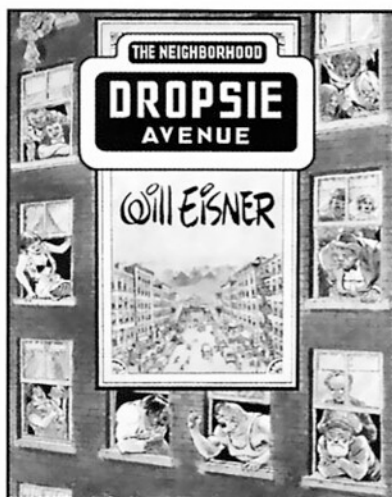

by Greg Thompson (graphic novels) and Craig Miller (miscellaneous items)

Dropsie Avenue, Will Eisner had a keen awareness that a place can be just as important as those who inhabit it. Here, a building is torn down to make room for a new high rise. By allowing four ghosts, previous dwellers of the city in which the building resided, to tell of their experiences near the building, Eisner conveys the emotion, both good and bad, that inhabits those places we take for granted.

A LIFE FORCE (1988) - A perfect example of Eisner's command of human emotion, *A Life Force* deals with the down-trodden people of the depression as well as the effects Hitler's rise in Germany has on a group of Jewish people living in a Bronx tenement. All of Eisner's stories center around the human condition, but nowhere is it portrayed better than in this masterpiece.

CITY PEOPLE NOTEBOOK (1989) - While not a graphic novel *per se*, this addendum to *New York the Big City* fleshes out the concepts Eisner began in his previous OGN. Through a series of illustrated essays and short vignettes on city life, Eisner brings everyone one step closer to experiencing life in the Big Apple.

WILL EISNER READER (1991) - A collection of seven different stories previously printed in several issues of *Will Eisner's Quarterly*. Eisner shows his sense of humor with a series of one-pagers dealing with telephones, and the seeds of Fagin the Jew are laid with Eisner's sequel to Kafka's *The Trial* aptly entitled *The Appeal*. A great introduction to the creative world of Will Eisner.

TO THE HEART OF THE STORM (1991) - This semi-autobiographical story, as many of Eisner's stories were, is told in flashback as an older "Willie" is on a train headed to his station during World War II. It begins with young Willie's family moving to the Bronx, and he learns firsthand of anti-semitism. It is also an intimate look at how one deals with adversity can mold and shape one's personality and life. Winner of an Eisner Award (!)—which seems oddly appropriate, or perhaps oddly redundant—for Best Graphic Album. (*The Name of the Game* would win the same award ten years later.) This volume also won Eisner a Harvey Award for Best Graphic Album.

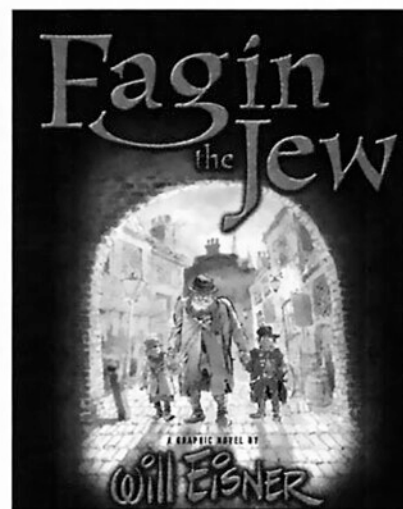
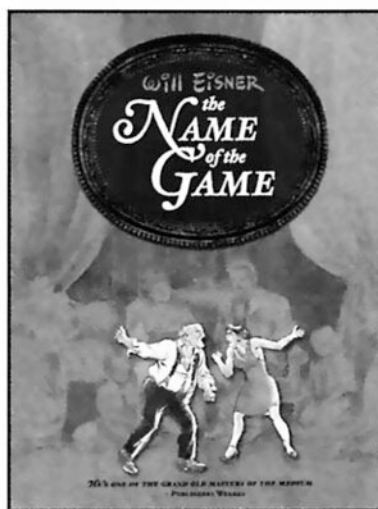
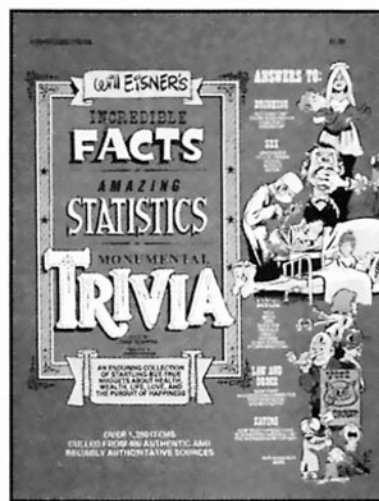
INVISIBLE PEOPLE (1993) - Eisner's disgust at man's inhumanity to man was the springboard for this trio of stories of those people that have fallen through the cracks of society. In reading this, one gains a new compassion for those we see and quickly avert our gaze. *Invisible People* won Will Eisner the Harvey Awards for both best writer and best cartoonist, proving that the master was still at the top of his game.

DROPSIE AVENUE: THE NEIGHBORHOOD (1995) - Eisner returns to Dropsie Avenue, the setting in *A Contract with God*, in these stories of the evolution and de-evolution of a neighborhood populated by all races. Over the course of several centuries, Eisner shows the founding of Dropsie Avenue and takes us through its hardships and its glamour. The characters in the graphic novel are outstanding, but the neighborhood itself is the real star. This story also showcases Eisner's keen awareness of history and his penchant for being able to place people wherever and whenever they need to be and make them believable.

FAMILY MATTER (1998) - Everyone has had that moment in their family life when niceties and familial courtesies are thrown out the window and the stone cold truth rears its ugly head. This is that story turned on its ear. Eisner takes a normally happy occurrence, a birthday celebration, and lets the characters run wild. Long suppressed feelings of betrayal and hidden abuses are revealed in a manner so shocking that it will take your breath away. After reading this, I was happy with the minimal amount of dysfunction in my own family.

LAST DAY IN VIETNAM (2000) - Eisner's career as a soldier and his many trips to different camps as a writer and artist for *PS Magazine* gave Eisner all the material he needed to write this stunning memoir of the soldiers of Vietnam. It focuses not on the war itself, but the soldiers affected by it. There are stories of the horrors of war, those of comedy and those that will bring a tear to your eye. As a personal aside, my father was in the Vietnam war, and would never talk about it. After coercing him into reading this book, I learned more about his time there than I had in my life up to that time. Winner of a Harvey Award for Best Graphic Album.

MINOR MIRACLES (2000) - Will Eisner once again revisits the neighborhood of Dropsie Avenue to deliver four stories of extreme luck and unbelievable coincidence that could be described as nothing less than miraculous. Of course, as with any tale, the reliability of the storyteller in each vignette is questionable at best, but it does leave the characters with a sense of wonderment and hope. A very uplifting story, and an unusual departure from the stories of *Dropsie Avenue*.

NAME OF THE GAME (2001) - The American Dream was something every immigrant held dear while coming to America in the early 1900s, and Eisner uses that as the focus of this story. Spanning several generations, *Name of the Game* showcases a Jewish family as it attempts to assimilate to life in America. A family-owned business is the centerpiece for many of the plot points, and marrying not for love, but for social advancement is sincerely addressed. As always, Eisner does a great job con-

veying the humanity of the situation, and works his magic on transporting the reader to the time and place of the story. Won an Eisner Award for Best Graphic Album.

FAGIN THE JEW (2003) - Before making this into its own graphic novel, Eisner had intended to adapt Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. During his research, he learned a lot concerning Jewish life in Dickens's time, which led him to believe that Dickens was not using the name Fagin the Jew as an insult, but rather as an identifying device for the character. From there, Eisner crafted an intriguing tale of Fagin as a sort of hero who undergoes hardship after hardship because of his heritage, his social standing, and his lack of wealth. In the end, what Will Eisner created is a perfectly crafted masterpiece that stands proudly next to Dickens's classic novel.

Miscellaneous Collections

THE SPIRIT COLORING BOOK (1974) - Thirty Spirit splash pages are beautifully reproduced in black-and-white (ostensibly for coloring, though it's unlikely many editions were used for that purpose). Each splash is accompanied by text describing the story from which the page came. The cover is new art by Eisner.

INCREDIBLE FACTS, AMAZING STATISTICS, MONUMENTAL TRIVIA (1974) - Eisner provides illustrations to accompany facts and figures collected by Jason Hanson.

COMMUNICATING WITH PLANTS (1974) - Eisner illustrates a light-hearted look at what the book claims is "actual scientific probes into the amazing sensory life of plants" and how human communication with plant life can affect such life. (There are two other volumes in the Gleeful Guides series by Poor House Press, *Occult Cookery* and *Living With Astrology*.)

WILL EISNER COLOR TREASURY (1981) - This deluxe color hardcover reprints two Spirit stories, twenty-five magazine covers, ten *Spirit Portfolio* plates, and more, with an introduction by Catherine Yronwode and a wraparound cover.

SPIRIT COLOR ALBUM (VOLUME ONE) (1981) - In the same format as the *Will Eisner Color Treasury*, this first of a three-volume set reprints thirteen Spirit stories, including the origin from the 1966 Harvey comic. Eisner provides a new wraparound cover.

SPIRIT COLOR ALBUM (VOLUME TWO) (1982) - Thirteen more stories include memorable selections such as "The Name is Powder," "Gerhard Schnobble," and the two-part introduction of Sand Saref. The front cover is a montage from the second Sand Saref story.

SPIRIT COLOR ALBUM (VOLUME THREE) (1983) - The final *Color Album* contains thirteen stories, plus "The Spirit's Women Club" text piece from 1975.

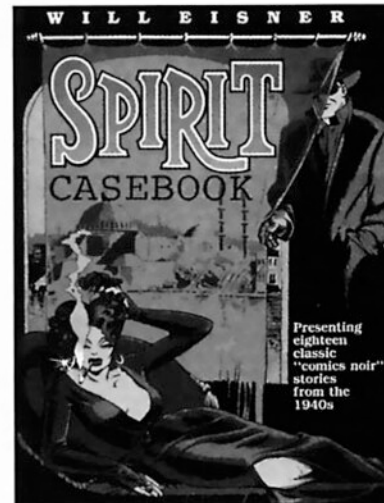
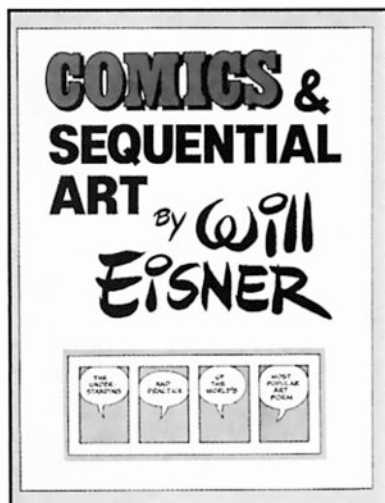
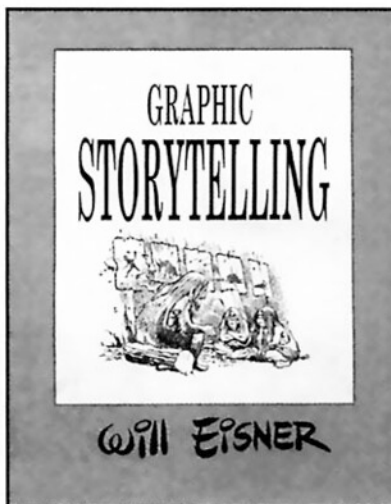
THE ART OF WILL EISNER (1982) - Catherine Yronwode edits an extraordinary volume of rare, notable, or previously unpublished art and photos. Introduction by Jules Feiffer.

THE OUTER SPACE SPIRIT (1983) - This volume collects the astounding Spirit stories written by Jules Feiffer and drawn by Wally Wood in 1952. Also presented here are Feiffer's scripts and layouts for the stories, a foreword by Pete Hamill, an introduction by Cat Yronwode, and a reminiscence by Eisner.

COMICS & SEQUENTIAL ART (1985) - This classic volume (along with just a few other books such as *Figure Drawing For All It's Worth* by Andrew Loomis, *Constructive Anatomy* by George Bridgman, and *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud) is an utterly essential part of every comic artist's library. Eisner's years as instructor at the School of visual Arts in New York City is put to good use as he examines separate different aspects of comics storytelling such as imagery, timing, the frame, and expressive anatomy. Eisner presents the formal elements of storytelling instead of detailing, for instance, the specifics of drawing the human anatomy (as there are many other books covering that). Even few professionals understand comics storytelling as well as Eisner, making this book a unique and valuable treasure. Five years later, Eisner produced a follow-up, *Graphic Storytelling*.

HAWKS OF THE SEAS (1986) - Al Williamson assisted in assembling the publication of Eisner's first major work (done in 1936-38 for foreign markets), a pirate adventure told in a series of one-page Sunday newspaper strips. Even at this early age (Eisner turned just nineteen years old in '36), Eisner's artistic abilities were formidable. The large (10.25" x 14.5") format displays this art beautifully. Williamson writes an introduction, and Eisner provides a foreword.

SPIRIT CASEBOOK (1990) - Eighteen stories are presented in black-and-white. Overall a nice presentation, though unfortunately a number of the stories had already been collected in the *Treasury* volumes. Introduction by Eisner.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT (1994) - This collects all nine of Eisner's annual Christmas Spirit stories. Never released in hardcover, unfortunately, as the quality of the reproduction here is astounding—the best color versions up to that time. Winner of an Eisner Award for Best Archival Collection/Project.

GRAPHIC STORYTELLING (1995) - A follow-up to *Comics & Sequential Art,* Eisner sets out to "deal with the mission and process of storytelling with graphics....Comics are essentially a visual medium composed of images" even though "the story is the most critical component in a comic," and in a quality comic, the images (as well as the writing) will effectively convey this story. Once again Eisner brilliantly breaks down the essentials of storytelling to produce an insightful textbook few industry professionals could have created. Winner of an Eisner Award for Best Comics-Related Book.

WILL EISNER SKETCHBOOK (1995) - The first Eisner sketchbook ever published contains page after page of preliminary cover designs and story page layouts. Even in the early stages, the art displays intelligence and graphic power, providing an illuminating look into Eisner's talents.

WILL EISNER'S SHOP TALK (2001) - This volume collects interviews that originally appeared in *The Spirit* magazine and *Will Eisner's Quarterly.* Eisner talks with Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Gil Kane, Joe Kubert, Jack Davis, Neal Adams, C.C. Beck, Milton Caniff, Gill Fox (about Lou Fine), Harvey Kurtzman, and comics distribution pioneer Phil Seuling.

THE WILL EISNER SKETCHBOOK (2003) - This massive volume is similar in content to the earlier sketchbook, though presented in an even more deluxe format and including more recent work. A particular treat is a pencilled and partially inked eight-page Spirit story from the mid-nineties.

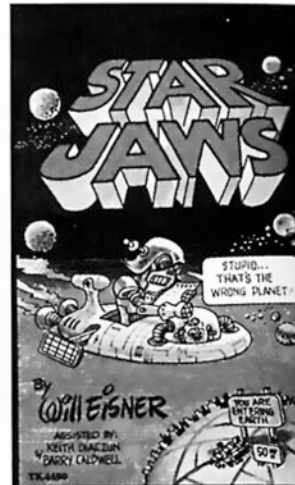
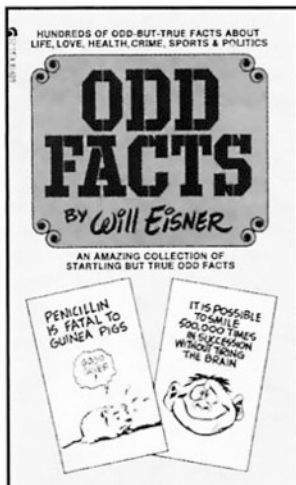
Classic Adaptations

THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG (1999) - First in a series of adaptations of classic tales, Eisner tackled the Grimm Brothers fairy tale. Though designed to appeal to kids, the book will appeal to all of the artist's fans.

THE LAST NIGHT (2000) - The book provides "an introduction to Don Quixote," the famous story by Miguel De Cervantes. Obviously a slim volume cannot capture the full original work, but Eisner creates a framing sequence that allows for a logical way for him to select key elements of the novel and present them in a cohesive story.

MOBY DICK (1998) - Perhaps even more than in *The Last Night*, Eisner attempts the impossible here: retelling Herman Melville's massive *Moby Dick* (generally considered one of the greatest novels in the English language). This is the third Eisner adaptation—though, oddly, the first to be copyrighted.

Mass Market Paperbacks

ODD FACTS (1975) - Similar to the Gleeful Guides volume *Incredible Facts, Amazing Statistics, Monumen-*

tal Trivia, this mass market paperback collects various facts with accompanying Eisner illustrations.

SPIRIT CASEBOOK OF TRUE HAUNTED HOUSES AND GHOSTS (1976) - Eisner beautifully illustrated text stories of purportedly "true" ghost stories. The Spirit appears on the first and last pages of each story to act as "host." Considering the superficial nature of the subject, Eisner's art is extraordinary and contains some of his best work of the seventies. Ironically, the cover is not by Eisner.

STAR JAWS (1978) - Unlike the *True Haunted Houses* book, this collection of *Star Wars*-themed one- and two-page cartoons appears to be a mostly uninspired quickie job, though in fairness Eisner is not the sole creator (he is "assisted by Keith Diaczun and Barry Caldwell").

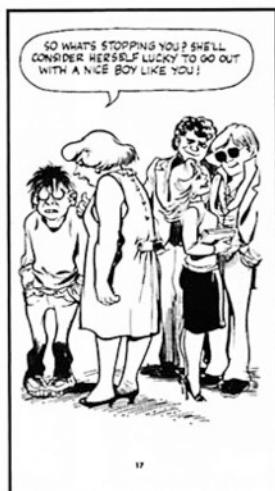
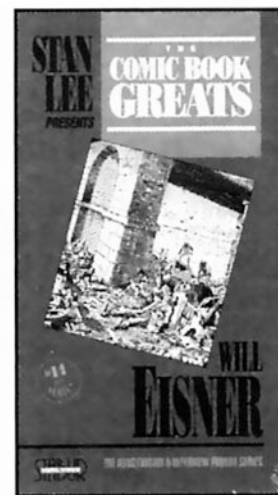
BRINGING UP YOUR PARENTS (1980) - Eisner is back in top form with this humorous look at differences between parents and their teenage kids.

THE SPIRIT (1989) - This mass market paperback reprints six Spirit stories, though panels are cut and pasted to account for the books dimensions, thus destroying much of the graphic beauty of the original pages. Eisner provides an introduction, "Who Is the Spirit?" (later slightly re-written for *The Spirit Casebook)*.

Other Notable Items

EV'RY LITTLE BUG (1987) - Kitchen Sink Press released this LP record album containing Eisner's song lyrics set to music in 1947 by Bill Harr but never recorded. Also appearing here are excerpts from the 1948 Spirit TV show and other original music. (We'd like to say more, but, honestly, we haven't had a working turntable in many years.) The disc's side A contains Eisner's art from the '47 sheet music. Side B features a new Eisner illustration.

THE MASTERS OF COMIC BOOK ART (1987) - Ken Viola's acclaimed hour-long video documentary features interviews with ten of the greatest comic book creators of all time: Eisner, Harvey Kurtzman, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Neal Adams, Berni Wrightson, Moebius, Frank Miller, Dave Sim, and Art Spiegelman. After host Harlan Ellison's enthusiastic introduction of Eisner ("a talent that appears once every hundred years"), the artist talks for about five minutes and comments on effective storytelling and the possibilities of the medium.

THE COMIC BOOK GREATS VOLUME 11: WILL EISNER (1992) - Stan Lee interviews Eisner in a relaxing conversation between two old-timers as they reminisce about the early days of the industry and discuss (and debate) storytelling and recent developments. By the end of the fifty-five-minute session, Eisner has moved to the drawing board and

shows why he is one of the masters with a simple yet clear demonstration of comics storytelling. Stabur Home Video released a series of these videotapes (all with Lee as host) during the early nineties.

COMIC BOOK REBELS (1993) - Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette interview twenty-two important comic book creators (including Dave Sim). Eisner gets the final chapter in a section ironically titled "The New Independents: Pass the Ammunition." (Other pros in the section are Frank Miller, Colleen Doran, Rick Veitch, and Todd McFarlane.) Putting Eisner (who had been an "independent" comics creator since the 1930s) in this section was probably an intentional compliment: even in his seventies, Eisner was still breaking new ground.

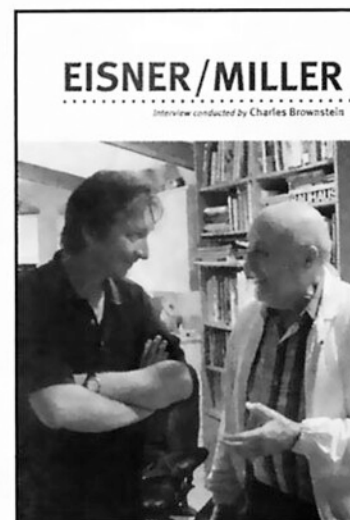
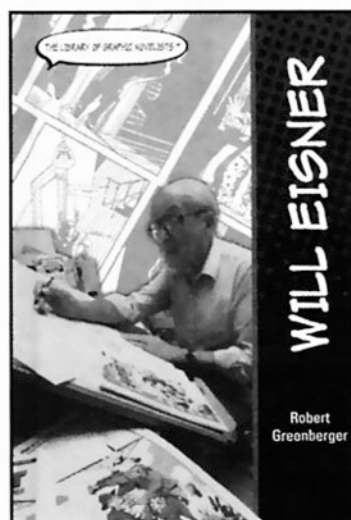
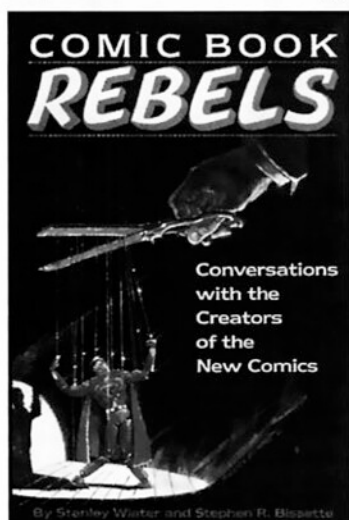
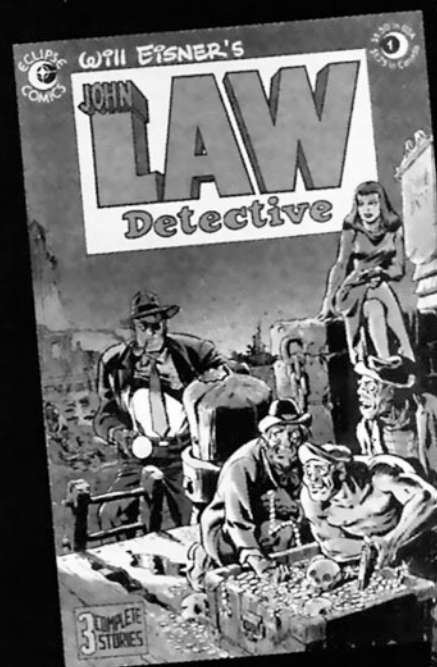
PANEL DISCUSSIONS (2002) - Durwin S. Talon interviews fifteen comic book creators, including Eisner, for this softcover book.

THE LIBRARY OF GRAPHIC NOVELISTS: WILL EISNER (2005) - One of a six-volume book series (the others feature Colleen Doran, Neil Gaiman, Joe Sacco, Art Spiegelman, and Bryan Talbot), this colorful and fast-paced work by Robert Greenberger is a great introduction to Eisner's work and history, though the $24 price tag probably scares away the uninitiated. Perhaps a lower-priced softcover will be forthcoming.

EISNER/MILLER (2005) - This massive (350-page) volume contains a series of conversations between Eisner and Frank Miller discussing numerous aspects of art, the comics industry, history, and much more. Heavily illustrated with art and photos, this is one of the greatest resources ever published for insights into both artists and comes, fittingly, just a few months after Eisner's death. Charles Brownstein co-ordinates and assembles the material.

Et Cetera

Eisner produced two deluxe portfolios, *The Spirit Portfolio* (1977; eleven plates in a hardcover folder; signed edition of 1500) and *City: A Narrative Portfolio* (1980; six plates; signed edition of 1500). He contributed plates to the *First Amendment Portfolio*, the *National Cartoonists Society Portfolio of Fine Comic Art*, and the *Superman Portfolio* (reprinting his pin-up from *Superman* 400).

A list of every major Eisner article appearing in a comics news magazine is beyond the scope of our survey here, though Eisner is cover-featured in *The Comics Journal* 89 and *Comic Book Marketplace* 38, making those issues worth picking up. As we go to press, several other Eisner-themed issues have been announced.

Will Eisner's Elektra

Clockwise (from top left): Jennifer Garner as Elektra in the 2005 feature film; Eisner's astounding first page for "Sand Saref," the story that introduced the character on January 8, 1950; Frank Miller's cover art for Elektra Saga 2 *(1984) reprinting the Elektra sequences from* Daredevil; John Law Detective *1 (1983) featuring the first version of the Sand Saref story from 1948. Facing page: Eisner's cover for Kitchen Sink's* The Spirit 52, *which reprinted the Spirit's first Sand stories.*

"I wanted Daredevil to have a female protagonist, like Sand Saref in *The Spirit*. In fact, I ripped off the first Sand Saref story to do the first Elektra story. Rather than just regurgitating it, though, I put a harsher edge on the conflict. I had there be more consequences to the fact that he was living with a contradiction in that he loved a woman and she was his enemy."

—Frank Miller, *The Comics Journal Library, Volume Two: Frank Miller*, p. 21

Will Eisner's influence on comic books has been immense, but it has been over ten years since his work and his most famous character, the Spirit, have appeared in a regular comic publication[1] (the last being Kitchen Sink's 87-issue reprint series that ended in 1993), so it's possible that new comic fans are seeing the current outpouring of appreciation following Eisner's death and wondering, "Just what's the big deal?" They might see DC's prestigious Spirit hardcover series reprinting the stories from the beginning, but most new (i.e. younger) fans are going to need a less expensive introduction to the work.

But every comic fan (and, thanks to the recent feature film, many, many other people) has heard of Elektra, and relatively few probably know that, if not for Will Eisner, there may never have been an Elektra created by Frank Miller for the *Daredevil* comics in the early eighties.

Yes, Elektra, one of the most exciting characters to arise out of superhero comics during the past quarter century, may owe her existence to Will Eisner.

Miller began drawing *Daredevil* with issue 158 (May 1979), with J.M. DeMatteis scripting. With issue 168, Miller took over the writing chores as well and began with a bang, introducing Elektra with his first issue. With Denny O'Neil overseeing as editor, Miller started his tenure carefully, borrowing from an old master, Eisner, to create the foundation of his story. Miller, who had long admired Eisner's work, readily admitted in interviews his debt to Eisner.

A comparison between Eisner's original two-part 1950 story featuring the Spirit's former-lover-turned-master-criminal Sand Saref and Miller's ninja-trained assassin reveals significant differences, and Elektra's popularity can be credited to Miller's exceptional storytelling abilities and the character's strong personality, interesting history, and (let's face it) cool look. But it's also undeniable that Miller had a great original story from which to work.

Sand Saref

January 8, 1950 saw the introduction of Sand, but the story was originally written for John Law Detective, a character created for *The Adventures of Nubbin the Shoeshine Boy* and (when that never appeared) *Sunday Comics* (intended as a newspaper supplement like the *Spirit Section*) in 1948. When that project also never appeared, Eisner attempted to start up a *John Law Detective* comic book, but that, too, fell through. Eventually the eleven-page story was reworked as a two-part Spirit tale with three new pages added.[2]

In the Spirit story, Sand was revealed to be a childhood love of Denny Colt (who later became the Spirit). Sand's father is a Central City cop; Denny's uncle (with whom he lived) a small-time criminal. During a robbery, the uncle shoots and kills Officer Saref, then, in despair, kills himself. The tragedy ends the friendship between Sand and Denny, though Denny tries reconciliation several times. But Sand falls in with a bad crowd and over time becomes a notorious international criminal.

The murder of a Central City patrolman (Officer Fisk—ironic, in light of Elektra's later employment by the Kingpin, Wilson Fisk) during her recovery of a Nazi germ-warfare tank from a ship that had sunk six years earlier near the city's waterfront brings the Spirit onto the case. Finding a clue that ties Sand to the case, he remembers their past and reluctantly pursues her.

In the follow-up story ("Bring In Sand Saref" from January 15, 1950), Sand prepares to make her getaway via seaplane at Pier 34th Street. But one of her hired hands, unhappy with her $20,000 payout to him for his assistance on the germ-warfare job, attempts to blackmail her. He threatens Sand at gunpoint when the Spirit intervenes and knocks him out. She recognizes him immediately as Denny Colt, and after an embrace and a kiss, she leaves as "an army of cops" are on the way. The

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[1]The exception was Kitchen Sink's eight-issue miniseries *The Spirit: The New Adventures* (1997-98) with contributions by such powerhouses as Moebius, Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Kurt Busiek, Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons, Tim Bradstreet, Michael Allred, Paul Chadwick, Scott Hampton, and others.

[2]The story in its original form eventually saw print in *John Law Detective* (Eclipse Enterprises, 1983), along with other material intended as part of the 1948 package. Catherine Yronwode writes an interesting text piece detailing the history of the story and the various projects.

Left: the death of Sand's father, when Sand was a child. Right: Elektra's father is killed during her college years.

Left: the Spirit reluctantly begins his mission. Right: Daredevil faces the same dilemma.

Spirit simply can't bring himself to arrest her, despite the horrible crimes she has committed. He tries to get her to stay, but she realizes what would happen: "You're a cop, and you'd have to turn me in....All I ask is a five-minute handicap." By the time Commissioner Dolan arrives and asks who's on the plane that has just taken off, the Spirit simply says, "Forget it, Dolan. Forget it."

Elektra

In "Elektra" (*Daredevil* 168), Daredevil and Elektra are both trying to locate a thief, Alarich Wallenquist—DD in conjunction with a court case, she for a bounty reward offered in Europe. At their reunion, Elektra knocks Daredevil out from behind, but as he loses consciousness, he recognizes her voice from years before, when they were students (and lovers) at Columbia University. Matt Murdock was studying pre-law; Elektra Natchios, daughter of the ambassador from Greece, political science. Soon Elektra and her father were being held hostage in the administration building by radicals. Matt created a make-shift mask and rescued Elektra, but her father was shot and killed in the melee. Elektra ended her relationship with Matt and returned to Europe to continue her studies—though she ended up becoming a bounty hunter, putting to use the martial arts training she learned at an early age.

Back in the present, Wallenquist plans to escape via seaplane at the waterfront, but Elektra interrupts the escape. While quickly overpowering most of the bodyguards, she doesn't see a tranquilizer dart shot at her, which temporarily knocks her out. The seaplane arrives, but out jumps Daredevil and, with a slightly revived Elektra, takes down the remaining players. Daredevil and Elektra kiss, and she finally cries, having been unable to show any emotion following the death of her father.

Elektra's character became much more complex over the years, of course. She appeared in several more issues of *Daredevil* until her death in issue 181 at the hands of Bullseye, and these appearances—in addition to Miller and Sienkiewicz's astounding eight-issue mini-series *Elektra: Assassin* (1986-87) exploring her past and a one-shot graphic novel by Miller and Lynn Varley, *Elektra Lives Again* (1990)—gave the character a vibrancy rarely seen in comics. It also allowed Miller to explore in greater depth the tension between Matt's and Elektra's relationship. (After the initial two-part Sand story, Eisner brought the character back for additional adventures.)

One interesting aspect about both the Sand and Elektra origins is the absence of mother figures. The assumption is that both have died, leaving the fathers to raise the young daughters. Did this play a part in Miller's use of the name Elektra when he was adapting the *Spirit* story to *Daredevil*? We don't know for sure, but it would be quite a coincidence if unintentional. As fans of classical literature know, Electra was the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. As Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae and Argos, and commander-in-chief of the Greek forces in the Trojan War, was

Left: the Spirit enters in time to save Sand. Right: Daredevil makes an even more dramatic entrance.

off in battle, Clytemnestra began a public affair with Aegisthus. When Agamemnon returned home from battle, he was murdered by his wife and her lover. Outraged over this, Electra conspired with her brother Orestes to have him kill her mother and Aegisthus.[3]

Top: Sand recognizes Denny Colt. Bottom: Elektra recognizes Matt Murdock.

An "Electra complex" is, according to psychoanalysis, an unconscious tendency (generally manifesting itself first between the ages of three and five) of a daughter to become attached to her father and hostile toward her mother. Neither the Sand nor Elektra origins reflect any animosity between mothers and daughters[4] (the mothers are simply *gone*)—and there's certainly no suggestion that the daughters conspired to have their mothers killed. However, the father's death in both stories leaves the daughters orphans, and this trauma turns them away from any moral guardrails. (Interestingly, Matt himself grew up without his own mother, thinking her to be dead until, years later—in a Miller story—he finds out she'd been working as a nun.)

Elektra Lives Again

After Frank Miller moved on to other projects, his famous ninja assassin remained in limbo for a while, perhaps (or perhaps not) because of the publisher's and/or other creators' respect to Miller not to tamper with the character until he had an opportunity to return to her. (How many writers would want his work on the character to be compared to Miller's?) But eventually the economic temptation for the publisher must have been too great. In 1996, Marvel began a new monthly series (ending with issue 19 in 1998), and in 2001 a second series started. Various mini-series and one-shots have also appeared.[5] Clearly the character has "legs."

When Mark Steven Johnson wrote and directed

(continued on page 52)

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[3]See Sophocles, *Electra;* Euripides, *Orestes;* Aeschylus, *The Choephori* (the second part of his Orestian Trilogy); among others.

[4]In *Elektra: Assassin,* Elektra remembers her mother's being shot and killed in what appears to be an assassination attempt, but Elektra's state of mind is such that one cannot assume that the events are being recounted accurately.

[5]We'll admit our bias here: we haven't read any of the non-Miller Elektra stories. Nothing against the writers (many of whom are quite talented) who have worked on those issues. It's just one of our quirks. We also wouldn't read Sandman stories not written by Neil Gaiman or Watchman stories not written by Alan Moore (if any existed). Okay, maybe if Alan Moore wrote a Sandman story....

Comic Book Storytelling

Will Eisner, Dave Sim, and Archie Goodwin on good and bad storytelling

Eisner, Sim, and Goodwin appeared on a panel in July 1984 at the Greensboro, North Carolina Comics Convention. Goodwin served as moderator. A transcript of this panel appeared in a slightly different form in *Will Eisner's Quarterly* 4 (1985).

Goodwin: *Here on the panel with me are Dave Sim and Will Eisner. Is there anyone here who doesn't know what Will Eisner and Dave Sim do or have done?* [No response.] *That makes the introduction very easy. Today's topic is storytelling. And if I can borrow a page from Tom Snyder's book—Mr. Dave Sim, Mr. Will Eisner, just what the heck is storytelling?*

Sim: I think it's largely an instinct sort of thing. I read a review some time ago of a comic, discussing it from the standpoint of dancing, insofar as that if you're still going "One, two, three, step," then you haven't quite got it. If you've got it, you can watch somebody walking down the street and break the action into panels with the correct pacing for what you're trying to get across. It has to be practically second nature. It has to be the way you see things.

Eisner: I think storytelling is the art of communication. It's essentially no different from the caveman who came in from the fields after killing a bison and telling the people in the cave all about it. It's a direct piece of communication from one person to another. The skill—the art—with which a communicator tells it, and the tools he employs to tell it, are the things we're talking about here. We're into a medium that employs both words and pictures for the purpose of recounting an experience. We share with someone else an experience or observation. There are media that are totally film. There are media that are just words; they employ a code system people have to learn to understand. We are dealing with imagery, which is a far more primitive form of communication than pure words by themselves.

DS: Even more than describing it as storytelling, it's story involvement. It's not just to communicate a story to someone else, but to have them lose the context. It's like being at a good movie. After a while you forget you're watching a movie to the extent that you're involved. That's what makes for good storytelling. If I'm reading a comic book and gradually start reading faster and faster, I'll have to go back later to see how they did it. The best storytelling is involving enough that you don't stop and admire the technique as you're reading it. It moves you along.

WE: That's a good explanation on how to do it. Don't you think that what the storyteller has to say is as important, or are we just talking about the art, the skill, the technique of telling a story, without consideration of the story itself?

AG: *What I was trying to push you toward is, what do you think is good comic book storytelling as opposed to novels or film or short stories? What do you think makes good comic book storytelling?*

WE: I like those parameters. The differences in so-called comic book or sequential art is that you're employing pictures or imagery in sequence, which has an effect on the kind of subject matter you're dealing with. Very often a picture itself has a message. We are all very oriented toward imagery. We understand a phrase coming from an individual that's modified by a physical gesture. These things are terribly important within the frame of our understanding of what is being said, or what the message is. In comics, you are dealing with words and images in a proportion that has no ground rules. There are no textbooks telling us how many words per panel there should be, or how many words per story there ought to be. I've done stories with no words at all; eight pages of nothing but imagery, and told a

A page from Cerebus *65*

story. I think you must understand first the medium in which you are working and then deal with the kind of story that you're trying to tell.

DS: I think that's entirely true. The proportion varies. You can't arbitrarily say, as an example, that you can only have twenty words in a balloon. I just finished a story where Cerebus dictates a letter, and the whole letter is contained in the word balloon. That establishes a certain context, that this was dictated verbatim as it came out; that he didn't pause to think about what he'd say next. It creates a good visual picture of this enormous chunk of words, and it changes the pacing, slows it down on that page. I think that's a lot of what you have to determine as you're going along: how much of the proportion is the writer, and how much of the proportion is the artist? It will change from page to page. There are definitely pages where I feel much more like a writer—the reason for a particular page is the writing. There are other pages where—while it's true that I'm writing pictures—it's the pictures that are going to bring the idea across. Very often that can be the most difficult thing to do. The stories I'm doing for Archie's *Epic* magazine, I've set myself the boundary of not having any words in them. It is silent narrative. That can be very difficult. You can't sit there and jot down lines of dialogue and eventually get the context from that. You have to start making pictures in your head, trying to create funny images that will play off each other.

Sim and Gerhard's brilliant "silent narrative" story "The First Fifth" from Epic Illustrated *26.*

WE: That leads me to a question I'd like to ask you, Archie. What is the role, in the world of comic books, of the writer? What do you see as the role of the writer?

AG: *It probably depends on the project. When you're writing, essentially you're collaborating with the artist. Ideally, the two of you are able to play off each other, give each other good ideas. A good writer should realize that what you are doing isn't created in stone, so that if an artist picks on something good, you can take advantage of it. You can incorporate it, or if you're working plot, pencil, script, in a line, you can play off what you see in the pencils.*

WE: Well, do the writers see themselves as the creator or the innovator, and the artist as the illuminator of the idea?

AG: *I think some writers do. Again, it depends. If someone has come up with an entire concept for the story or the ongoing character, written a full script and presented it to the artist, certainly they would see themselves as the creator. However, even in that position, if you're at all wise or at all interested in comics, I would certainly want an artist who I could draw into the creation process, and make him feel like a part of it.*

WE: Okay, I understand that. The artist who undertakes such a mission has to function or work in service to the initial idea. But in the beginning, the idea, the basic concept for that story, is in the hands of the writer. Many artists, for example, particularly many students of mine in school, say, "Well, I'm not a writer. I need a writer. I can't do it." I don't often believe that. What has happened is that he's been told he can't write, or he doesn't want to write. Usually, he just wants to draw his pictures. He doesn't want the responsibility of fashioning an idea and developing a plot, developing all the cohesive ingredients that make the structure of the story.

AG: *I think when you're an artist, particularly when you're beginning, it's enough of an enormous task to just master drawing and use of the art tools. To suddenly be saddled with the responsibility for story and dialogue puts a lot between you and maybe the thing you want to do most, which is the drawing. So then having the advantage of working with someone else's script is good.*

DS: I think it's one of those chicken-and-egg type

of situations. Most of the companies work on the basis of a writer, a penciller, an inker. If someone is proficient as a penciller, would it be fair to have a company policy that everybody had to be able to do everything? In the case of Marvel, there's certainly nothing to hold back anyone who can't ink or can't write from establishing quite a good reputation in the field, if he has at least one skill.

AG: *Well, I think that's always been true, but one of the nice things about this panel is that the two of you do it all, so it would be interesting to get your own personal approaches to it. As a writer, I can only do so much. I need an artist to go through and fulfill some of the material. I find it very hard if I'm writing a script and I don't know who the artist is going to be. I find I tend to overwrite or come up with things that may be impossible for the artist to do. It's much easier to write a story if I know who the artist will be. I would think it would be a tremendous luxury if you're writing material you know you will be able to draw. How do you personally do it? Do you generate images?*

A page of "silent narrative" from Eisner's Signal From Space

DS: I carry a notebook around when I'm starting an issue, and I'll usually start with the first page. I will have episodes in the story I intend to get to. Those are sort of the cornerstones. Then it's a matter of having natural progressions or natural transitions from this situation to that situation. *Cerebus* #65 ends with Cerebus walking out to a window in his hotel and making a speech to a crowd outside. Two or three pages before that, the archbishop he's talking to suggests that that's what he should do. There was then the matter of figuring something funny or interesting that would make a good transition from the point of "this is what he's going to do" to "this is where he's going to do it." That can be difficult if the transition doesn't come readily to mind. I don't know if you find this, but there are times when I get up in the morning, and I have to write, and I feel more like an artist that day.

WE: No, I have no schizophrenia like that. *[Laughter]*

DS: I do! No I don't! *[Crowd laughter]*

WE: Well, everybody approaches the thing differently. I start with something I want to say. I generally start at the ending. Like one day I get up, and I have another story to do, so I'm going to do a story. Generally these things germinate in your head over a period of years. *Signal From Space* was an idea I'd had in my head for some time. I wrote the basic plot on an airplane coming from Frankfurt, Germany. I was looking out the window watching the clouds; the clouds looked like something you could walk on. I was thinking about the planets and so forth, thinking about what would happen to us here if we truly got a signal from space. Something we could prove was a signal, and was an intelligent message of some kind. What would happen on Earth here? As I thought about that, it seemed to me it would make an awfully good story, and I wrote the basic plot of it down on the back of a TWA envelope. I came back, and I started with the ending in my mind and worked my way back to the very beginning of the story. I opened it up as I thought about it. I ultimately created it as one piece. I always write it all out first, even the long continuing chapter-by-chapter novels. I sketch it out.

DS: The only thing I can think of that I could compare that with is the twenty-five-issue "High Society" storyline. Basically, I had an ending in mind, or after a while I had an ending in mind, but first the structure came, the idea that I was going to do a five-hundred-page story. Basically what I did was establish the threads of the plot. They were just sort of introduced but not elaborated on for the first half of the story, the first twelve issues, and then with the succeeding twelve issues, I tied things together.

WE: I'm very reassured by the comparison. *[Chuckles]*

AG: *Both of you, if you're doing a longer piece as opposed to a tightly-knit short story, and if you come up with a character that began as a supporting character, but you've grown to like that character, do you allow yourself the latitude to stand apart and give him more room?*

WE: Oh yes. Arthur Miller said that characters take on lives of their own. In the case of *Signal From Space*, the major character took on a life of his own, and after a while, I couldn't make him do things that I knew he wouldn't do.

DS: The best characters work that way. You'll find that the better the character is, the more clear-cut the personality, and, like you say, it's almost like trying to force a very independent personality into a channel where it doesn't want to go. It may help the plot—

WE: Well, there's a basic honesty with which you approach these things. Of course, the dishonesty comes in if you are the artist and the writer at the same time—you never give yourself a problem that you can't solve.

DS: That's right.

WE: So if I get an idea for five thousand Indians coming over the hill, I scratch that idea so that there are two Indians coming over the hill. *[General laughter]*

DS: I remember Howard Chaykin saying that he liked to do Westerns, but he didn't like to draw horses. I said, "How can you do a Western if you don't like to draw horses?" And he said, "Well, it was very Shakespearean. There were a lot of people pointing off-screen and saying, 'Look! There goes a horse!'" *[Laughter]*

WE: I think the method of approaching writing is unique to each individual. Within the context of trying to determine the role of the writer versus the artist, in a field that has been commonly employing writers and artists as two separate entities, I think that that makes this kind of discussion very worthwhile. A lot of comics artists start out their careers shaped by the fact that they are working with someone else's script always, and the writer who enters this field, and Archie, I think you mentioned this in the previous panel—

AG: *I think that I said it couldn't be done.*

WE: Yes, and I think you told it the way it really is, that it is very hard for a writer to break into a field unless he joins an artist. They can weld something together which then becomes viable. In the end, the product is the drawing; it is the total composite.

DS: I'd like to get back to storytelling. There are actually two sets of dynamics: the story, or the overall plot; and then there's the dynamics of the characters. I think what we're talking about when we say the characters take on lives of their own is that very often, we can't impose the story on the characters. You develop traits in them as you go along, and then all of a sudden, they may not conform to what you want on the fiftieth page of what you've drawn.

WE: Obviously you don't see Superman reciting poetry or giving a Shakespearean soliloquy. I think that's part of the craftsmanship involved. I was more concerned with the self-imposed or recognized roles of each character. I feel very strongly about the fact that there is an element of writing in the drawing. That's very, very important.

AG: *And if there isn't, then you don't have a comic book. You've got a Big Little Book or something else.*

WE: Or you have a tapestry.

AG & DS: Yes!

WE: Many of the books that are turned out today, particularly in the more glossy magazines, as far as I'm concerned, are huge tapestries. Magnificent, stunning art which overwhelms the story, and there's nothing you can do with that.

AG: *I've published many a tapestry.*

DS: As an example, then, you get into expression and whatnot, and the fact that an eyebrow at an appropriate moment in the story will communicate far more than any kind of physical thought balloon or—

WE: That's directorial skill that you can't even discuss, but you have to know it's there. Body postures, all the tricks of an actor, are very important. It comes under the column I would like to label "imagery," with the understanding that imagery is the visual language. There is a visual language, as we all know.

DS: Yeah, there's an implicit understanding in what one arched eyebrow means.

WE: Well, there are gestures and postures that are unique to different cultures around the world, and they are not universal; and there are some that are universal. Some anthropologists a few years ago found a tribe in New Guinea and discovered that they were smiling at moments appropriate to the kind of discussion they were having. They were using gestures that were known and understood to people in a more civilized society. But gestures and postures are a unique form—very primitive, you might say—communication, language communication. I think that's very much a part of the skills that an artist must know and understand and have at his command. Once having said that, and having given those skills to an audience, he must be able to employ them in service of the story and what the writer wants him to say. If the writer says, "This man is about to pull the trigger on a gun, but he can't do it; it's a very painful thing," someone has to make a decision as to how many panels you're going to devote to that struggle of pulling the trigger or pulling the pin on a hand grenade, or whatever it is he's about to do that's against his nature. I want to know, who's making that decision at Marvel and DC? The writer or the artist?

DS: It's a case-by-case basis, I think. If you look at the *X-Men* issue that Barry Windsor-Smith drew and Chris Claremont wrote [*Uncanny X-Men* 186], I think certainly Chris would probably agree there's more there for the writer to work with. There's a great deal more thinking on the part of the artist. If it's

an artist who is taking the bare bones of the plot and drawing the expression and whatnot, if it is brought across as well as it should be, then it becomes easier for the writer to put a couple of words in the panel, or maybe not have any words at all. There are also degrees, too.

WE: Who's making the decision when you say, "decides not to have any words at all?" Who makes that decision?

DS: The writer.

AG: *I would say, yes, on a regular Marvel book, the editor or writer, and hopefully the artist, too, would be involved in a long-range plotting situation. They might be plotting one specific issue or plotting a general outline of where the book's going for the next three to six issues. The writer would probably come up with some specifics, things he wants to do. The editor and artist, if they're in general agreement, then the decision would have to be made—okay, with this character in the situation you described, where he stops to pull a trigger and finds himself unable to do it, it's important then to decide that this is the accumulation—*

WE: You as who, the writer?

AG: *Or editor. Possibly the writer and maybe the editor would decide something like that. The writer might say, "And we'll have this scene where he wants to do it, but he can't," and the editor might say, "That's great! That's important, it's taken us three issues to lead up to that. Make sure you give it two pages." If it's a one-issue story, you would give it a page, and it might be the writer or the artist, or the editor—*

WE: What bothers me is that, in my shop, it's not made on that basis. The decision of how many panels to devote to this man trying to pull the trigger depends on what he is doing and how important that particular element is—

AG: *I thought that that was more or less what I was saying.*

WE: But the decision is made, it seems to me, not that far in advance. The decision is made as the page is being laid out, and as the story flows. What I want to know is, does the writer say in his directions to the artists, "This man can't pull the trigger, he's being reflective about it, and I want you to devote three or four panels to this."

AG: *He might very well say that, yes.*

DS: Again I think it depends on the editor, it depends on the artist, and it depends on the writer and how they work together.

WE: Well, all these depend on them, but I was trying to find the standard rule.

AG: *I don't think there is a standard rule, because it would vary from company to company, and from individual to individual. I think a myth has grown out of the Marvel way of working. It maybe started when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, would come in and talk about the story, and Stan would do a page or half-page synopsis, or something like that. I think it's changed greatly since then. Since there are now many more writers involved, the synopsis done now is generally more elaborate. Some writers will give the artists an almost page-by-page description of what's going on. It's certainly grown. It's not quite as up in the air as maybe it once was. You still have the situation, I'm sure, where someone may be collaborating, and as he's drawing, the artist will suddenly realize, "The way I've done this, this is a beautiful moment here. I can see this scene being expanded so it will be even more effective," and so on. In that case he will probably call the editor and ask if it is okay to go ahead. The editor may say yes. Or they'll consult with the writer, and they'll all agree. Or they'll say, "Gee, that's very nice, but if you devote two pages to them opening the door, you won't have time for the assassination of the president in the end, which we've been sort of building up to." You'll have situations like that.*

DS: Or then you have the situation again with the *X-Men*. As Barry Windsor-Smith drew it, it was expanded to accommodate the expanding storyline, wasn't it? It started off as a regular-size issue, and then the decision was made that you can't get all this across.

AG: *Let's do it as a double issue?*

DS: Yes.

AG: *Yes, that may have happened in that instance. I wasn't there. I can't tell you for sure. However, it's the kind of thing they wouldn't let happen very often. I think the team-up of Chris Claremont and Barry Windsor-Smith was enough of an event to support the expansion.*

WE: Well, I recognize the fact that there is no absolute formula, and only the success of the story itself attests to the success of the combination. But we're talking about storytelling as an ingredient in the whole art form.

AG: *Right.*

WE: I regard it as a major function, and I maintain that the art is in service to the story itself. The artist must be able to tell a story within itself, and he must be able to withhold some of the pyrotechnics that he's capable of when it is necessary to tell a story. I think one of the dangers, at least in the shops that I've run, where there was a writer and an artist working independently but together, is that on the edges there was a kind of clash of purpose. The writer writing with words and the artist writing with pictures would meet somewhere on the edge, and the artist, for example, would hesitate to do something that I would probably do. I would take a page of dialogue and throw it out and go into a pantomime. Most artists wouldn't. I never faced that situation, because I never worked with another writer. But I would arbitrarily throw that dialogue out, because I felt and feel that that was the way to do it. I wouldn't do it because I felt I wanted my art to dominate at that point, but rather I felt that I would tell the story better. Now on those cases, you can have a real clash of judgment.

AG: *Well, that's when you really need an editor, although the theory is if you've been given the script by the editor, the editor has already approved it. However, I think if it were a good editor and a good writer, and they both realized that what you wanted would make it better, I would think it would behoove them to go along with you. You leave yourself open to make those kind of changes.*

DS: It's basically just dividing up the decision-making. As an example, Bill Loebs, who does *Journey*,

mentioned a thing to me a while ago that he doesn't try for a natural break between issues. He's doing an ongoing story, so he doesn't feel compelled to have a beginning, middle, and end in the twenty pages allotted to him. I realized, the more I thought about it, that I was kind of partial to that too, but I'd been self-imposing a structure, the "this had better finish off with at least the semblance of an ending" type of thing. Now I'm trying to allow myself the luxury to say that this is where the story is going, and it doesn't naturally conclude on page twenty. There's no reason that I can't say, "Well, stay tuned till next week." I don't do recaps and whatnot to explain what went before—

WE: I wouldn't necessarily agree with that, because I think that the reader has to be satisfied to some degree, and there should be enough discipline—. I think it's a cop-out, frankly. I think Loebs is copping out. *[Chuckles]* I think you can put a satisfying enclosure within a given effort, because I've done it over and over again.

AG: *I would think also that you run a terrific danger of very sagging dramatic pace, to a certain extent, if you're not planning for climaxes.*

WE: In a medium like this, where you have a two-month gap, or at least a month's gap, between chapters or stories, how are you going to leave a reader with somebody about to walk off a cliff and in the next chapter, you open with him being saved? I think we're talking about needles and pins here right now, but I would object to that if I were editing.

DS: I don't think I would do it as a regular rule. I was just indicating that there are different structures.

A page of almost-silent-narrative from The Uncanny X-Men *186 by Barry Windsor-Smith (script by Chris Claremont)*

I don't feel inhibited now in doing a completely slow-paced issue. There doesn't have to be a melodramatic peak at this point or two melodramatic peaks here. There really is no set rule.

AG: *I think what you're really against is artificial dramatics.*

DS: Yes, the imposition of "I better do something here." And the thing of doing a humor comic and feeling compelled to make at least fifteen of the twenty pages funny. Certainly I felt that way after ten to eleven issues; there wasn't really a track record for it. But after sixty monthly issues, there is required a change of pace. There's a need to give the overall story, the 1300 pages, more of a wave pattern of its own, rather than making sure each issue has its own individual wave pattern—an up and a down, and finishing with an up. Then when you pick up the next issue, you start in again.

WE: I can't argue with that. You have to go back to what was said about the individual choice of pace.

AG: *I think you have to know your audience very well. If you don't, that's a very dangerous—*

WE: That brings me to what I'd like to say about the writing business. I write for an audience. I'm thinking about a particular experience level, an intellectual level, and almost an age level when I'm writing. I'm writing as though I'm writing a letter to somebody. I don't know, in exploring this, how you people feel about it, but that's how I feel.

AG: *I'm generally trying to write something that I'd like to read myself.*

DS: Yes, there's an element of that. I also tend to have specific individuals in mind. When I found out that Harlan Ellison was a fan of *Cerebus*, that raises—

WE: You started writing to him, were you? *[Laughter]*

DS: To the extent of saying, "Hey, come on, we better wake up here, because Harlan Ellison is going to read this, and he's going to know good writing from bad."

WE: And in between, you're saying, "Now, Harlan, get this." *[Laughter]*

DS: "This one's for you, Harlan. Pay attention." Yeah. Or the same as Barry Windsor-Smith. There is a certain attitude that helps me to think that, okay, these are people whose work I admire, and if I know they are reading the book, I feel less inclined to say, "Oh, well, this is good enough," or "This will get by." I feel more compelled to expand the borders or try something new.

WE: Well, what I'm talking about really is not necessarily my own pace, but a basic problem here is, when you are writing, you're dealing with the problem of evoking a common experience. When the writer says, "The laughter was like a babbling brook," he is expecting the reader to have heard a babbling brook, to understand that. You do this with visual imagery, too, by evoking a common experience. Once you begin doing that, which is the very essence of writing, you have to take into account the

age and the experience level of the reader to whom you are addressing this piece.

***AG:** I think that if there's a fault in comics, it's that common experience and really true human touches are too often left out. You don't necessarily get the little moments. You always get the big moments in comics.*

WE: I think those little moments make the difference between really good storytelling—those are the things that people notice. People have seen those little things, they know they are there. It adds validity to the message.

DS: You have good and bad storytelling, and then you have like momentary inspiration where you do something that you think, "Yes, that's a good moment." It's only later on, when twenty people come up and all single that out as *the* moment in that issue—I think that's completely out of your hands. You can't sit down and say, "I'm going to do something in this issue that is really going to cut to the heart of everybody and will become a common and shared experience that everyone can understand." But I think if you're trying to be an artist, or if you're trying to produce "art," that the discipline involved is trying to remain as open to that as possible, and to try and recognize when you've got a good moment or break—

WE: Then why do all the characters I see in comic books have heroes stand up and say, "I am going to shoot you now!" or "Ye gods, he shot me!" Or having a balloon explaining something that the picture panel clearly shows? Why do they do that over and over?

DS: There's bad comics. *[Laughter]* There's more bad comics than there are good comics. I don't just mean that in a present-day context. Since 1933, if you stacked up every comic book, and God forbid, somebody should sit down and read all of them, the amount of good material—or great material—is going to be one percent, maybe less, of that total volume.

***AG:** You see that same thing in a movie or on television, where suddenly two people are in a room, and they explain the plot to you: "Well, I have to meet my sister," and they give you a lot of exposition. I don't think only comics do that. Often comics are guilty of that, having them say exactly what you've already seen.*

DS: I think there's more of a danger that a writer and artist combination—again, Archie points out, if you don't know who is going to draw the script, you want to make sure that at least the story makes sense. If he can't draw it, what is he supposed to put in that panel? You're going to have something in the caption that says, "This is what's going on."

***AG:** We're in the area of bad storytelling.*

DS: Yes, and there's a lot of bad storytelling from writer-artists too. There's a lot of amateur material that people bring up to me at conventions, and obviously the person is a writer-artist. He's drawn the story, written the dialogue and lettered it, but sure enough, there's someone standing up there saying, "I'm going to shoot you!" There're people who can do it, and there're people who can't.

WE: A lot of young people coming in the field have only the large proportion, as you put it, of bad comics to use as models. They've learned their craft or cut their teeth on the trash they've seen.

***AG:** They may do very bad comics based on very good material.*

DS: Yes, you can do *A Contract With God*, and someone can say, "I'm gong to do a comic book just like this, but it's going to be about an Arab kid living in Milwaukee." And he can sit down and draw it and badly render it and use terrible dialogue. But he can still say, "I was inspired by *A Contract With God.*" He just wasn't inspired in the right way. Or he didn't have that much in him.

WE: Well that depends.

***AG:** Or someone can say, "Frank Miller is a great comics storyteller, therefore I'm only going to do five horizontal panels on a page." They pick up the tips that a really good person may do for a very valid reason and may think, "Oh, yeah, that looks really neat, those little sliver vertical panels. I'm going to do 'em."*

WE: You're quite right. People attribute success to some of the surface things of a major success, and they don't realize that the underlying story is the key.

Bad storytelling: as Bullseye reaches for his gun (clearly illustrated by Gil Kane), Daredevil says, "He's going for the gun again!" If writer Jim Shooter didn't know in advance that Kane (a master storyteller) would be pencilling the issue and overwrote to hedge his bets, it was up the editor to step in and fix things. The editor of this issue: Archie Goodwin! (From Daredevil *146.)*

About Last Issue

by Dave Sim

Cerebus Versus Cerebus

I was interested in the account that you presented from my old friend Tom Skulan of FantaCo about the ins and outs of the counterfeit *Cerebus* #1 story.

"Then we put up some copies for sale in the store for something like fifty dollars (although we didn't end up selling any of the books as originals, fortunately). I immediately wanted to try to check out the sellers' story. I called Dave Sim and asked him about the books. He seemed completely unconcerned about it. I described to him what this book looked like...."

This would appear to mesh with my own recollection that someone had called earlier than the full-blown crisis stage and asked me to describe a *Cerebus* #1 over the phone. Unfortunately, that doesn't mesh with

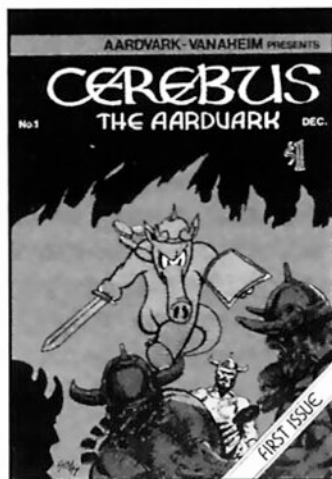
"...and that I had had number ones in the past..."

The person I had spoken to had specifically said that the reason they were calling was because they had never seen an actual #1, so they wanted to know if what they had bought matched the description of *Cerebus* #1. They might have said that they had purchased multiple copies of the book—and that would've sounded more than a little suspicious at that late date (the cover story, as I recall, was that they were friends of mine, and I had given them the ten copies when the issue first came out), but it was certainly true that I was largely unconcerned about it throughout the entire episode. The only area where I was concerned was whether the counterfeits—if counterfeits they were (and that seemed so unlikely as to make any predisposition on my part to jumping to that conclusion to verge on a self-declaration of extreme paranoia—"Oh, yeah, right, Dave. Someone is counterfeiting your stupid fanzine")—could be differentiated from the real ones that I owned. Hard-hearted, perhaps, but remember that Deni and I had made approximately thirty cents each from the real #1s that were then selling for anywhere from fifty to a hundred dollars each which, naturally enough, didn't make anyone's hearts bleed on our behalf (nor should it have). However, as for...

"The thing that struck all of us in the store about this book was the smell—these books stunk. *They smelled of fresh ink, big-time. So I asked him about it. He didn't seem to think it was anything. I couldn't get much information from him one way or the other."*

No, to the best of my recollection, I definitely never had anyone comment to me at any time about there being a fresh ink smell, or I would've smelled the counterfeit that arrived in the mail to see what they were talking about. I had been away from the collector end of things for too many years at that point to be smelling comic books on my own: what is second nature to the dealer and the collector is a bizarre habit to the civilian. When a copy of the counterfeit did turn up in the mail, I swear that I didn't inhale. Had someone mentioned a fresh ink smell, my inclination would've been to ask him if that seemed likely on books that were theoretically four years old, and the question would've been purely rhetorical.

"At this point we entered the 'frustration and then give up' phase. I called Dave Sim back to give him the information that I had gotten, and that they are counterfeits, and again—it wasn't like, 'Go away,' or 'You're wrong,' but was just sort of like, 'Okay. Thanks for calling.' It's hard to describe. There was just no reaction one way or the other."

This seems to mesh with my own recollection, if this second phone call came in at the point where we were experiencing a flurry of phone calls on the subject—the short space of time between a store calling to tell us that they had been offered someone's "last ten copies" of *Cerebus* #1 which they had bought and then hearing from a store (down the road? In a neighbouring town?) that they had bought someone's last ten copies about an hour later and was the first store interested in buying a #1 in mint? After that there were a bunch of phone calls very closely spaced, one of which was from the FBI. I told Deni to start taking notes about the phone calls so we would have a record of the sequence of events as that sequence had taken place for us. We literally didn't have enough time to discuss the first phone call when the second came in, so it seemed important to keep the sequence of events straight if this suddenly became a big issue which, at that point, it showed every indication of doing. I found Deni's notes and a copy of *The Telegraph Wire*, the Berkeley, California Comics & Comix in-house fanzine—then edited by Diana Schutz—on my preliminary run-through of the Cerebus Archive raw materials and a copy of the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* article about it, all in the same file. *The Telegraph Wire* article was the most thorough, and I had trouble making anything much of Deni's notes—apart from the contact name at the FBI that identified the document for me. I'm pretty sure it's the only mention of the FBI in the entire Archive. Gerhard has just finished Phase II, having gone through the same material, separating them into two large piles: business

and non-business documents. The next phase will involve breaking all the material down by year, and I'll send copies of all the relevant materials to Craig and John the next time I run across them. They could be literally anywhere in the piles of 8½ x 11 documents, but I can at least say for certain that they exist, and they shed a certain amount of light on the subject.

Also, it's not completely true that I don't sign the counterfeits. I do sign them and offer the owner the choice of "Frank Frazetta" or "Neal Adams."

Copyright is Copywrong

It was nice to see a variety of viewpoints represented here. Mark Finn, I thought, cut pretty much to the heart of things (no pun intended) when he wrote:

I have to wonder if there will be any wives and children in the equation, and whether or not they will take the case to court in order to retain control of Cerebus.

The short answer for me, personally, is: no. I don't mind making mistakes, but I always prefer to make new ones rather than revisiting old ones, and marriage hasn't budged from the latter category for me since the early 1980s (nothing against Deni—the institution itself and what has been done to it in and by the feminist courts is like playing a card game that you know is rigged against you and is, in my view, structurally unsound), and I have no children that I'm aware of. The company is a 60-40 partnership with the balance of shares reverting to the surviving partner in the event of one of us predeceasing the other. In the case of Gerhard "going first," that would trigger an agreed-upon insurance payday for Rose as compensation for the 40% of the company reverting to me. At that point she would also be the custodian of Gerhard's share of the artwork that Ger and I agreed sometime ago—in the event of dissolution of the partnership—would be divided on a strict "two for you, three for me" basis to avoid haggling over who gets the more lucrative pages. Ger would get pages 1 and 2, I'd get 3, 4 and 5, Ger would get 6 and 7, starting from the earliest pages and proceeding through to page 20 of issue 300. Just for the record, we have never come close to having to initiate that sort of physical division of the artwork, so we just have it there as an asset in time of need. If we get an offer for a piece of artwork, we discuss the price and decide "yes" or "no." In the event of a tie, "no" is the answer.

If Gerhard "goes" first, then Rose would take his place in that decision-making. I have no more idea of how that would go than I know what Gerhard would do if I "go" first. Nor would I ask. There's no point in exploring hypothetical situations until they become actual situations in a case like this. The two most extreme alternatives available to Rose, as I see it, would be to divide the artwork in the agreed manner or to retain all of it for the Archive or something in between. I wouldn't think it particularly wise if she decided to dump 40% of the artwork and covers onto the art market at once, and I would strongly recommend against it, but it would certainly be her decision to make. Ger and Rose don't have any children and, so far as I know, have no plans to have any children, and I've been estranged from my family for two years, so—apart from the three of us—it would be very difficult to mount a case for challenging *Cerebus* going into the public domain and the artwork being donated to whichever lucky institution gets selected somewhere down the line. I tend to see the core *Cerebus* readership as the natural custodians of the intellectual property, and I would hope that that would be acknowledged officially to avoid any transference of rights from Dave to Gerhard to Rose to...anyone besides the public domain and the chosen institution.

Of course I'm not unmindful that the core of the on-going mutilation and asymmetrical inversion of Family Law in Ontario centers on making Family pre-eminent over any other consideration and that, consequently, a judge is very apt to award custody of *Cerebus* to one of Rose's distant relatives (or mine) when all three of us are gone bye-bye just because it, you know, seems like a really cool feminist idea to give sole custody of *Cerebus* to any woman who decided to make a pitch for it. So, that's part of my intention with the Cerebus Newsgroup, to groom them for decision-making in line with Ger's and my intentions with the intellectual property and, in the event of a total court-directed inversion of those intentions, that they would serve as a collective Loyal Opposition, dogging the footsteps of any distant relative—Ger's or mine—pretending to be carrying out Ger's and my intentions in violation of those actual intentions.

I also think Finn makes a good point when he writes

And if something happens to me, then my wife becomes the owner of my work and should be paid for its use. After all, she stuck by me when I was writing, encouraging me, even performing with me.

This is the reason that I say that Rose would get her insurance payday, justifiably, in the event of Gerhard predeceasing me and then would step into

his place when it came to all related decision-making. Obviously, I'd prefer just to assume full control with no strings attached, but it would be unjust to cut Rose out of the loop, because that would be ignoring what Gerhard's priorities were when he was alive and how he would want his assets disposed of. He would want Rose to be "taken care of," even though he knows that Rose is completely capable of taking care of herself. I avoid love like the plague it has always been in my life, but I *have been in love,* and I am aware of how dearly held these inexplicable paradoxes are. A Large Sum of Money is no replacement for a beloved partner, but no beloved partner wants his or her beloved partner not to get a Large Sum of Money at his or her passing. That core truth is the reason that insurance companies are among the most lucrative corporate entities going. In my own situation, the inexplicable paradox needs to be accommodated. The problem comes in when the inexplicable paradox might be used by someone I've never met to seize control of my property against my express wishes just because the court system has been skewed sufficiently to allow them to do so. The same situation extends to Gerhard's friends. I don't know his friends well, but I'm aware of who they are, and I know who Gerhard would want me to extend assistance to if he weren't around, and they fell on hard times or got themselves into a tight spot. That's one thing. Standing by and letting them take control of *Cerebus* is something else again. Gerhard knows whom I consider important individuals, and I assume he would extend the same consideration to those people if I weren't around. But that's very different from Gerhard standing by while someone I haven't spoken to in years—and who couldn't name three *Cerebus* characters with a gun pointed to his or her head—tries to take his property away from him.

In a slightly less provocative area, I think Finn homes in on a salient point when he writes about Conde Nast—the long-time custodian-proprietors of *The Shadow*—conducting a cyberspace blitzkrieg against anyone making use of *The Shadow:*

Their reason was simple: they told the fans that there was a new Shadow *movie being negotiated, and these websites not only hurt the movie's chances of getting made by taking money out of the companies' pockets to produce merchandise, but they weren't representing* The Shadow *in an accepted (signed off by the lawyers) fashion.*

A movie and lawyers have the same relationship as a whale and pilot-fish. An established intellectual property and possible movie deal make possible a spaghetti plate full of exponentially multiplied tangled strands of interwoven legalisms, each of which represents many hundreds of billable hours at Hollywood rates—which make the hourly rates of the New York lawyers employed by the comic-book companies look like the profits accrued by carnival card sharps by comparison. The more complicated the situation the better for the lawyers. *The Shadow* is a very straightforward proposition. You have the stories written by Maxwell Grant (the penname of Walter Gibson), the look of the pulp covers, the cast of characters, Orson Welles' intro on the radio show "The weed of crime bears bitter fruit. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows." And there you go, that's The Shadow as an intellectual property. There are other incarnations—like the 1940s comic book version—but they are marginal and largely unknown compared to the core elements described above. However if *The Shadow* as an intellectual property is *left* that way—as the sum of its core elements—it is not nearly as lucrative for lawyers as it will be if it is fundamentally changed. If the cast of characters is gone and replaced by gays and lesbians, the look of the pulp covers is gone and replaced by Roy Lichtenstein Pop Art blow-ups and The Shadow is dressed in skin-tight black leather and is portrayed by, say, Sharon Stone, then the lawyers can make a lot of money by (a) eradicating who *The Shadow* actually is by suppressing all previous incarnations of the intellectual property, everything *The Shadow* has been previously known as, and (b) trademarking and copyrighting and researching all aspects of *The New Shadow*, negotiating side deals with whomever currently owns the rights to Sharon Stone wearing skin-tight black leather, filing objections against whomever owns the rights to Sharon Stone wearing skin-tight red leather, and so on. I'm not sure if there is anything that can be done about this state of affairs, but I do maintain that the lawyers and the sensibility that informs them is, to me, the core of the problem and the reason that the present interpretations of trademark and copyright are "no way to run a railroad."

Same thing for the estate of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Even though the Tarzan and John Carter (and other) books are slowly slipping into the public domain, they still maintain that they [the Estate] are a hurdle that must be jumped. Thus, you sitting down in your chair right now, could publish a copy of Tarzan of the Apes *and sell it 'til the cows come home.*

...but only if you're willing to ignore the inevitable "cease and desist" letter when it comes in from the ERB Estate's lawyers. The level of uncertainty establishes just how nebulous and gray the situation is. Are the ERB Estate's lawyers defending the rights of his heirs, or are they, as I would maintain, indulging in "make-work" projects on their own behalf—essentially draining the Estate's remaining assets in a rearguard action that is (a) doomed to failure because the works are in the public domain, and (b) extremely lucrative for lawyers because you can still bill for eight hundred hours of work on something that was a lost cause from the beginning as long as you can charge for all of your research and traipsing around looking for a Judge willing to give you a

court date.

I also enjoyed your brief interview with Steve Rude about the rights to *Nexus,* and I was very enthusiastic about the idea of discussing it from the time you first brought it up. I have no end of differences with Mike Richardson, but there is no question that his purchasing the rights to *Nexus* and then returning them to Rude and Baron has never been acknowledged as the breakthrough that it clearly was in the decades-long impasse between publishers and creators over Creator's Rights. As Eric Shanower said in a recent issue of *The Comics Journal* about his own experiences with First Comics going out of business in possession of the rights to his *Oz Books:*

When First stopped publishing, Rick Obadiah called me up, and he says, "Do you want these rights?" He offered them back to me for a certain amount of money, and I said, "Yeah." So I bought them back [...] maybe other people got the same offer but weren't willing to pay the amount of money. I don't know. [...] I had to borrow the money. It was not chickenfeed. I've been trying to get the books reprinted since, figuring I could make the money back. I haven't reprinted them, so I haven't made the money back, so...someday.

If I were to speculate, I think the decision to return the *Nexus* rights to Rude and Baron was undertaken in the aftermath of the success of *The Mask* movie. I think Mike Richardson, as the creator of *The Mask,* saw how much money was at stake for a creator who had lost title to his own character. He could do the math and figure out how much money he *would've* made had he sold *The Mask* to DC and gotten their best licensing royalty on a movie deal and compare that to how much he *did* make because he owned the trademark and the copyright and, I suspect—I certainly hope—he wanted Rude and Baron to have those same advantages. Of course that kind of begs the question of what his attitude is towards the trademark of those properties that Dark Horse has retained—if, in fact, Dark Horse has retained any rights to the trademarks they bought outright back in the Comics' Greatest World days, as an example. It's none of any of our businesses except Mike Richardson, and that does seem to be a built-in impediment to discussing trademark and copyright issues (a) generally and (b) intelligently.

It's interesting that Steve Rude and I aren't that far apart in our assessments. At least that's what I infer when he says, "I believed that the only reason anyone would ever pick up *Nexus* would be so that Steve Rude and Mike Baron would do it." We're both relying on the fact that our work speaks for itself in establishing our implicit proprietorship. I don't have enough confidence in others to have Steve Rude's same level of evident equanimity—I would never sell the rights to do *Cerebus* relying on the assumption that whoever bought them would know that Dave Sim was the only one who could do the character. Rude admits, "We got very lucky," with Mike Richardson's entirely exceptional gesture of *noblesse oblige.* Mentally calculating what might have happened, I think he underestimates just how lucky he and Baron *did* get.

Dialectic Comics

Well, I thought I would've been stretching the connection to the breaking point by including the Neal Adams version of the *Detective Comics* #31 cover, *Batman* #227. I'd gush about it here, but I already did—on the letters page of *Batman* #231—back when the earth was still cooling. I even own the original page. Not the Adams cover (I wish!) but the letters page for *Batman* #231. One of the *Cerebus* readers found it in a pile of similar material and gave it to me at last year's SPACE.

("Will Eisner's Elektra" continued from page 41)
the much-maligned (unfairly, in our opinion, but that's another story; see our review in *Spectrum* 34 if you're curious) *Daredevil* feature film, he used the Miller run as a template, and Elektra's story was included—albeit altered, as is the norm for movie versions of comics, with Elektra as the lover-from-Matt's-past-gone-bad element missing. (Johnson condensed the two characters' histories, so that they meet as adults, her father dies, and she goes on a rampage, thus blunting the sense of long-diverging paths of the two individuals and the kinds of people those different paths create over time.) Though a sequel may be on the back-burner (or scrapped entirely) because of the mediocre box office, Elektra proved interesting enough to warrant her own spin-off feature film this year starring Jennifer Garner. Slightly better received, the film still did not capture the power of the original stories.

Or the power of the *original* story by Will Eisner.

—CM/JT

Dave Sim's Favorite Buffy Pic This Month

This is a nice one. You can sort of tell by the expression on her face that she's thinking, "This look is so...so...*fake*. I mean, *what* is our concept here? Farrah-Fawcett Majors the Vampire Slayer? 'What would Buffy look like at twenty if she had been born in the mid-fifties?'" It's a lopsided grin that's enjoying the nature of the Hollywood game as well as the sure interior knowledge of the Weird Things That Work on Men (like curling your hair into this completely unnatural configuration of Extreme Femininity that you aren't going to see these days outside of a fairy tale). What can I tell you? I'm fifty years old, and I'm a sucker for any look this feminine, even if it's a complete put-on. Sue me.

(Sarah Michelle Gellar from the first-season *Angel* episode "Sanctuary.")

Mind Games

Write to us at:
Following Cerebus
P.O. Box 1283
Arlington, TX 76004

e-mail:
editors@followingcerebus.com

We asked for letters, and we got them! But not having letters pages in issues 2 and 3 has us backed up a bit. Here's the first batch. More will follow in FC 5. Keep 'em coming!

Dear *Following,*

Issue #1 has been on my "What Do I Do With This Now?" pile for weeks, and I've actually read a number of the articles, though not any of them all the way through.

Why? Because I'm afraid I've fallen into a category of *Cerebus* readership of I Really Don't Care Anymore. And haven't much cared since about issue #250 (or was it #200?).

Now, don't get me wrong. I think the efforts of Dave and Ger have been tremendous and monumental from an artistic and writing perspective, not the least of which was the adherence to the monthly schedule (even if there was a slight faltering here and there down through the years)! Wow! No mean feat in itself. I've been a faithful reader since #52 (or was it #50?). I noticed by about the time of the Trip to Pluto I was becoming less and less engaged with Dave's Themes and Messages.

I have to agree with Jeff Seiler's assessment of the whole epic in his letter in *FC* 1's "Mind Games." Trouble is for me it became Boring and Frustrating and ThankGodIt'sNearlyOver for nearly the last 50 (or was it 60) issues.

It was nice to see all the characters from "before" that I really cared about (Elrod, Bear, Regency Elf, et al), but I'm not "getting" the finale (and probably don't deserve to since I haven't devoted my entire heart'n'soul'n'intellect to the whole story; I want the quick answer). Did Jaka and all the rest welcome him to heaven or hell? Is the light pulling him into heaven or hell? And was it worth it?

High point? *High Society.*

Low point? *Reads.*

Even so, my hat is off to Dave and Ger! Thanks for the ride!

Randy Mohr
Bellingham, Wa
e-mail

Dear *Following Cerebus,*

Ever since Dave first inserted himself into the Cerebus storyline, I've found the development of Dave's ideas and religious convictions to be as interesting as the development of the storyline itself (the two are, of course, inseparably intertwined in many ways—but many readers have, over the years, expressed the wish that the former would go away and leave the latter alone, and I am emphatically in the opposite camp from those readers). I'm delighted that *Following Cerebus* is around to continue to provide a public venue for Dave's writing; I found the "Dave Sim on Telling Stories" interview in *FC* 2 especially thought-provoking. I'm also pleased that the existence of *Following Cerebus* provides me with an opportunity to make up for the fact that I followed *Cerebus* from somewhere in the middle of *Church and State Book One* all the way up through issue 300 (yes, including all the 8-pt. type Torah commentaries) without ever managing to get around to writing an Aardvark Comment letter.

I found the "Something Fell" echoes to be one of the more powerful motifs in *Cerebus;* some of their occurrences actually gave me goosebumps when I first encountered them. There are two aspects of the "Something Fell" motif that I expected either Dave or the *FC* editors to mention, that didn't get mentioned after all, so I'm writing to mention them:

1.) Cerebus's fatal fall in issue 300 was presumably audible to anyone out in the hall near his room, which means that someone's immediate reaction to Cerebus's death was, presumably, "Something fell!" This is the book's final "Something Fell" echo, though we don't actually get to see it ("You never hear the one that gets you," as they say). I wonder if it's uttered/thought by Sheshep Ankh, pausing in the hallway at the faint sound behind him, or by O'Reilly, either rushing back to check on Cerebus, or still cowering in a closet somewhere hiding from the illusory snakes. Come to think of it, given the frequent association of the "Something Fell" echoes with other synchronicity/echo/resonance motifs, Sheshep and O'Reilly probably both think/say it at the same time.

2.) The phrase "Something Fell" has a double meaning. "Fell" is an adjective as well as a verb, which means that in addition to its obvious meaning of "I heard something fall down," it could also be parsed as "I sense the presence of something which is fell." In every "Something Fell" incident in Cerebus, *both* interpretations of the phrase are appropriate.

Speaking of fell things, here's a question I'd love to see Dave address sometime (if he's taking requests): toward the end of the "Dave Sim on Telling Stories" interview in *FC* 2, Dave says, "The Cerebus story ends in issue 200 in the sense that he won't let go of Jaka and won't see who and what Jaka is..." To those of us who think somewhat more clearly than Cerebus usually manages to, it's pretty clear "who and what Jaka is," at least on a fairly mundane level—i.e., it's clear what her psychological, spiritual, and ethical shortcomings are, and how these shortcomings are guaranteed to make her toxic as a girlfriend/wife, and particularly toxic in her effect on Cerebus. What I'm curious about is Dave's view of "who and what Jaka is" in terms of the highest-level chessboard—the God-vs-God's-adversary chessboard. That is, is Jaka a gamepiece advanced by God's adversary for the specific purpose of keeping Cerebus from attaining his full potential? If so, when did Dave consciously start casting her in that role?

Nick Walker
www.nickykaa.com
e-mail

Good point, Nick, with your "final 'Something Fell' echo" comment. While we did allude to the fall in issue 300, clearly we could have elaborated.

Craig and John,

On page 32 of *FC* 2, which is page 4 of "Passage" (wonderful to read a Cerebus story—even a not so hot one!—that I'd never read before in these post 300 days! Thanks!), panel 4: if you look closely, it says "The journey will *take* two less days" (not "be" as you suggest as a possibility).

Otherwise, haven't read it all yet, but looks like another great issue! Great going!

e
L nny
e-mail

Kenneth Lieck also pointed out our error. Once the published book arrived, we too noticed that our guess was wrong. Trying to make out the text on a computer screen was not possible, but fortunately the printed pages themselves turned out more clearly!

Dear *Following Cerebus*,

As a shooter myself, reading the story of Mary Ernestway's hunts, I could not help but notice that she always missed in the same way. She always missed off to the left. The further away the shot appears to be, the further from the target she seems to strike. (I will mention that I have not gotten out my trade paperbacks to check my previous recollection, although I recall checking it again during my original readings. Check it yourself before you bother to go on.)

All except for one time. That's when Ham Ernestway hands Mary *his* gun, and BANG, dead on the money.

Why is it that Mary always misses, except with Ham's gun? After all, I paraphrase, she is not incompetent, and her hands do not shake.

Well, if you are always missing in the same way and in the same degree, it means that when you line up the sights, the barrel of the gun isn't actually pointing at the target. It means that your sights are off, and you need to adjust them. Managing your sights is pretty much the third thing you do, after pointing the rifle at the target and pulling the trigger, to shoot well. It's about knowing your tools, like keeping your tools clean and sharpened.

So the question I posed to myself is, "Why are Mary Ernestway's sights offset?" Which then leads into, "*Who* has jiggered with Mary's gunsights?" Now, messing up someone's gunsights is not really a nice thing to do. Between men, on a safari, it might be a sort of minor practical joke—you loosen and slide someone's sights slightly while they're away and the next day, bang, they can't hit anything. They figure it out at the end of the day, test the rifle against a target to see how much it's off, and reconfigure the sights properly. At the campfire, the ploy is revealed, manly yuks and chuckles are shared, and the wronged party no doubt resolves some minor revenge like painting a goofy grin on his opponent's taxidermied kill to "get back" at his opponent. Everyone's macho is enrichec through these little comradely challenges.

But Mary never "gets it." Never ever. Weeks gc by, and she doesn't get it. In fact, Ham, who *must* know eventually gets so tired of it that he hands her *his* gur just so she can make a shot. One could even say tha years later, as she's telling the story, she *still* doesn' get it. Because she doesn't get it, the game can' progress. And because she doesn't get it for too long it ceases to be a practical joke—now it's an insult. You

Bryan Douglas (who identifies himself as "an amateur cartoonist and a Cerebus fan") sent this strip, which he calls "Thou Good and Faithful Cerebite."

couldn't own up to the trick now—it's too late. If a man ended up wasting an entire safari trip because of a practical joke, he would have to demand satisfaction or let it lie with a chuckle to show how big he is. But a woman? It would be a festering, wallowing sore, a grudge to end all grudges. It would never stop. And we see some part of it in how Mary tells the story, although I wouldn't say that was the main point.

So the question is, "Who jiggered with Mary's sights?" It's mentioned that the camp guides handle the weapons at night and take care of them, and certainly they have reason to play such a trick. But I think it would be dangerous for them, in their position, to do so, and that makes it unlikely. I think it was Ham. I think Ham was playing a little, manly joke that anyone should have gotten, and he ran up into the caricature of the strong, independent woman who Cannot Be Wrong and Cannot Be Tricked. And after the first several shooting expeditions he realizes that she doesn't get it, she can't get it, and he can't own up to it. He wanted something from her that she couldn't provide. All he can do is let her borrow his gun once so she can make a hit at least once during the expedition.

Now, my problem with this conjecture of mine is that it seems disproven by the later episodes where Cerebus introduces the gun as a means of overcoming the Cirinists, who simply cannot shoot and so cannot overcome it. Mary can hit a target, but even she has a basic lack, a glaring incompetence. My conjecture is sparked again by the passage recently shown in *Following Cerebus* 2 where Mary reads the words of Ham as, "... more fun to talk with on any subject and with sounder opinions and the best and finest ideals of anyone that I have ever known ever in all my life....A slow shooter, apt to be impatient, intolerant of fools and drunks...but the best companion in the field when things are difficult that I have ever known, bar none." And it makes me wonder what Ham really meant, what his code was, knowing that Mary would read it.

Why do I write this letter? I am wondering if I am barking up the wrong tree and just making stuff up, really.
Ron Levy
e-mail

Hmm, interesting observation. Let's hope Dave addresses it in next issue's "About Last Issue."

Hi there,

You said to send letters, so here you go. In "Dave Sim on Telling Stories" (FC 2, p.10) Mr.Sim casually mentions *Cerebus* as "the longest sustained narrative in human history." I thought he was kidding until I saw that this same statement is on the cover of the upcoming *Cerebus Letters* book.

My problem with this statement is that it is plain bulls---.

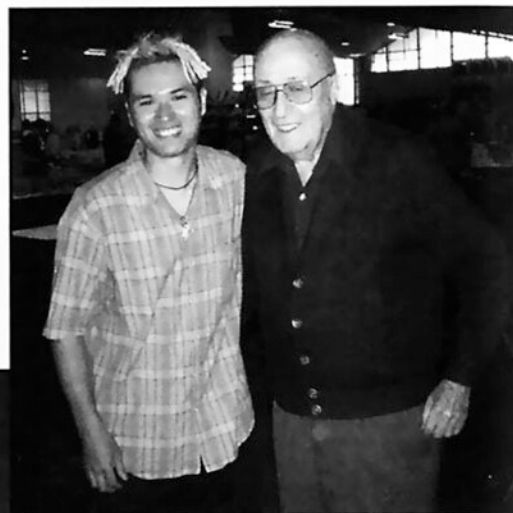
You guys can look up the exact page counts and years if you like, but off the top of my head, *Action Comics, Detective Comics, The Fantastic Four*, and *Thor* all ran for more issues, more pages, and more years than *Cerebus* and I'm sorry to say that they are all "sustained narratives."

So are strips like *Gasoline Alley, Dick Tracy, Steve Canyon*, and *Prince Valiant*. Not only did all these run longer than *Cerebus*, they were weekly, not monthly.

There are soap operas on TV that have been around for 30+ years for Christ's sake. They are *also* "sustained narratives."

And what about all those Japanese manga "phonebooks"? Come on.

Maybe Mr. Sim should stick to saying *Cerebus* was the "longest-running , independently-published, monthly (?) comic book in North America." That's still something to be proud of while still telling the truth.
Donald King
Coquitlam, B.C., Canada
e-mail
PS: Do I get a No-Prize?

Our guess is that you and Dave have different definitions of "sustained narratives." In any event, we don't have any No-Prizes on hand, but if we get some, we'll send one in a non-envelope via non-mail!

Above: Tyrone McCarthy (www.CorduroyHigh.com) and Will Eisner at the 2004 Toronto Comicon show. Photo by Jason Park.

Left: Mathew Mohammed (Black Bastard), Will Eisner, and Jason Park (DMF Comics) at the 2004 Toronto show. Photo by Tyrone McCarthy.

("Covering the Issue" continued from inside front cover)

Back Cover

Dave Sim's Shuster Awards logo and portrait of Joe Shuster based on a photo by Henry Mietkiewicz—the last person to interview Shuster before his death in 1992—with coloring by Paul McCusker. Final logo by Tyrone Biljan; production co-ordinator James Waley.

Between the Covers

As everyone knows, this is the Will Eisner Tribute Issue. Because Eisner never wrote or drew *Cerebus* (though he did collaborate in a *Cerebus Jam* story, reprinted here), there isn't a lot of Cerebus in this issue—which (a few readers have pointed out) also happened in *FC* 3. We'd like to keep the feature articles here wide-ranging and not universally Cerebus-centric (though they must in some way relate to Sim's work and themes), but we may have drifted too far afield too early. After next issue (a fascinating look at the different ways creators use—and do not use—editors, or other advisors, as they produce their graphic novels), we'll be going back to the very beginnings of the creation of Cerebus and take a look at "The Many Origins of Cerebus." So if you've been wondering what happened to the Cerebus in *Following Cerebus*, don't worry: he hasn't strayed far.

—Craig Miller/John Thorne

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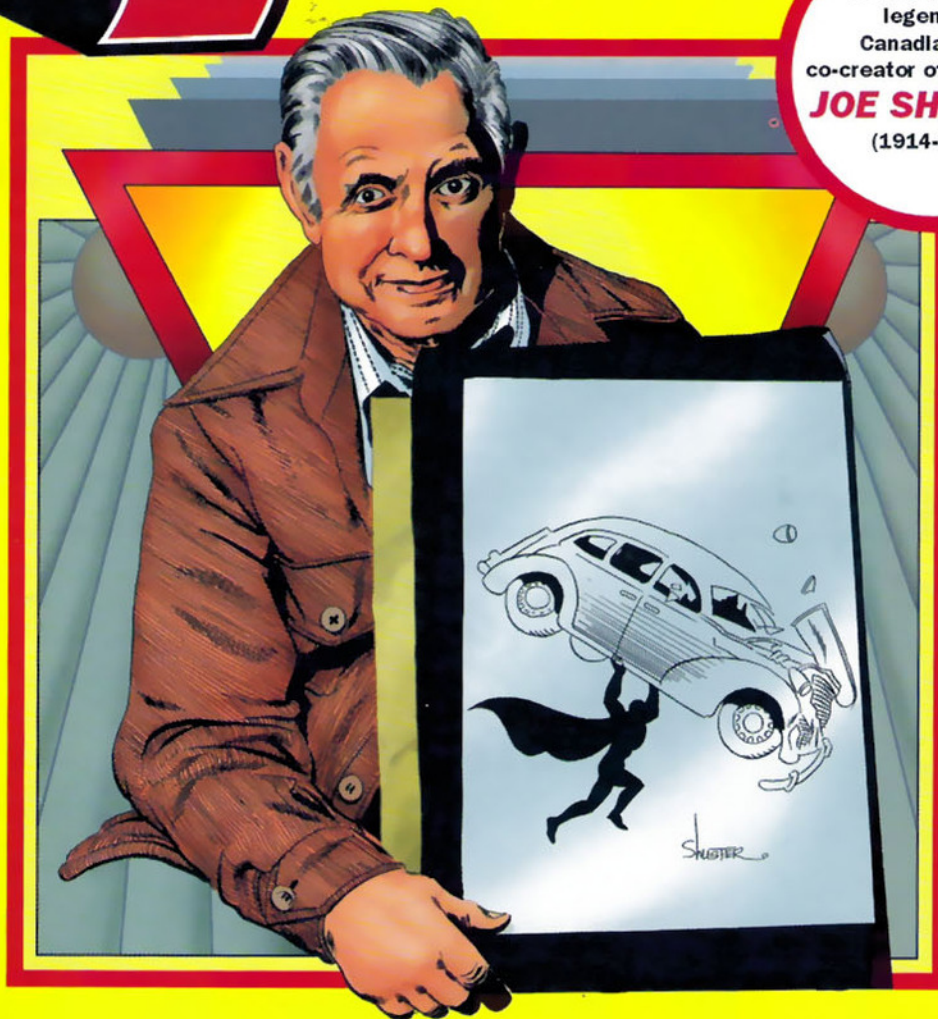
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